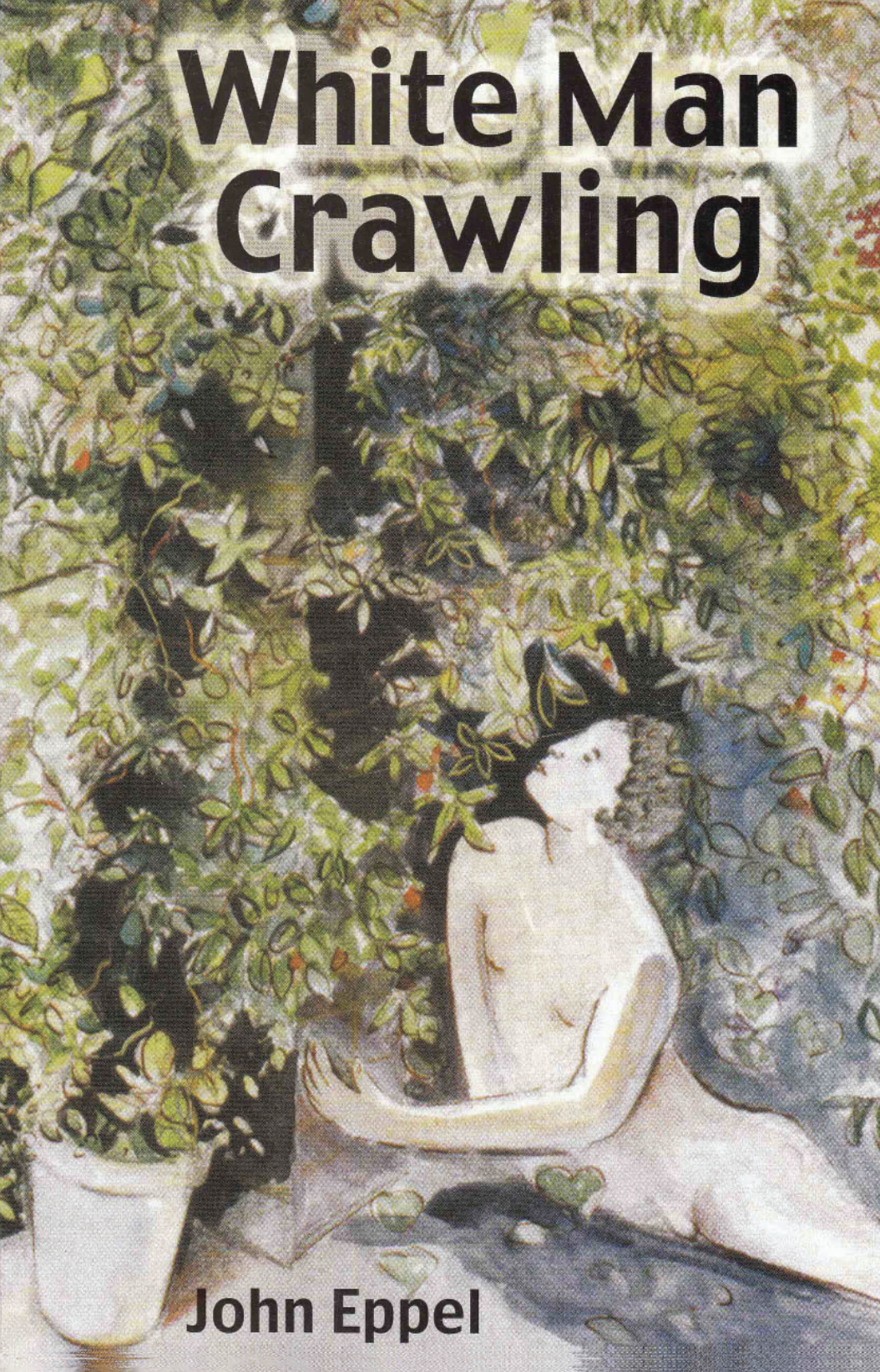


White Man Crawling



John Eppel

VISIT...

LANZAROTE
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For Fred
with love
and gratitude

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Hillside Road in August

This avenue should have been lined with trees
large enough to nest hamerkops, shelter
vervets, resolve the discord of a breeze,
shade road-rage, allay the helter-skelter
of wheelbarrows, bikes, cars, trucks, juggernauts,
stray donkeys, bumless boys with attitude,
buxom girls in tackies and mincing shorts...
trees that could claim the public's gratitude.

Instead it's dotted with colonials
too scrawny for children to climb, or snakes
to whisper in. Yet when that blossom spills
its incense on the smouldering grass, takes
to heart a variegated pink, a white
slipper, there comes a moment of delight.

Grass in Winter

I gather armfuls of tow-headed grass:
the dusty smell is intoxicating;
then I dance until the last flaxen stalk
drifts away on a cross-breeze. In winter
grass is blond like the children of settlers;
and at dusk, there's a wisp of gold, a rasp
of strawberry, a rustle of ash, a
sighing of bottles without corks. The moon
begins to climb, then all is platinum
cooling my nostrils, corners of my eyes,
shells of my ears, fingertips. Winter
spins itself into a blanket of love,
which, neither puffed up nor vaunting, briefly
transcends faith, and hope, and doubt, and despair.

The Stone Painter

His name is Farlow, and he paints the stones, dressed and raw, and the bricks, full and half, in the grounds of the police headquarters at the Drill Hall. His uniform is a khaki shirt, khaki shorts, car tyre sandals, and a red, tasselled fez. Farlow is a Muslim of Malawian extract. He began work at the Drill Hall some time in the 1950s. He was, by turns, tea boy, office boy, errand boy, and garden boy. It was part of the last mentioned job to whitewash the bricks and the stones, some random, some encircling trees, some delineating roads and pathways and herbaceous borders, some marking out jealously guarded parking space for the more senior police officers.

His first employers were the British South Africa Police who kept law and order for a Chartered Company called Rhodesia. His present employers are the Zimbabwe Republic Police who keep law and order for a Limited Company called ZANU-PF. His first employers gave him a black 28 inch bicycle. For greater comfort, he inserted a tennis ball under the saddle. The bicycle was commandeered by his present employers during Operation Murambatsvina when they were desperately short of transport to pursue prostitutes and fruit vendors. Now he walks everywhere.

During the Chartered Company years he kept his eyes lowered in the course of duty and pretended not to notice the way constables barely out of their teens would insult suspected law breakers, men and women, but mostly men, old enough to be their mothers and fathers. He pretended not to hear the cries, the groans, the pleas for mercy. How did that song go? Those boys from the Support Unit used to sing it over their mugs of *Tanganda* tea, disregarding him on the floor among their boots, polishing, brush in one hand, cloth in the other, *Cobra* wax, in ever diminishing circles. That smell; and that tune fixing itself in his memory like an ear-worm. Those offensive words:

I came to a river,
and couldn't get across,
So I climbed on a nigger
'cos I thought he was a hoss –

Kooma-rai-ai-ai-yai-yai,
Kooma-rai-kooma-rookie-kooma-kai.

In those days everything at the Drill Hall worked, from the petrol lawn mower to the electric kettle. There were no smashed light fittings, no leaking taps, no cracked toilet bowls. The ceilings hadn't fallen through, the window panes weren't plugged with newspaper, the fixed benches hadn't been ripped out of the walls. Above all, the *Olivetti* typewriters clacked away, with newly inked ribbons, and an endless supply of foolscap. There were paper clips everywhere, and drawing pins, and rubber bands, and manila envelopes. There were steel filing cabinets, brass hooks on the doors for the policemen to hang their caps, government-issue hand towels. Farlow kept the rooms spotless, and he had unlimited access to soaps, polishes, and detergents to keep them that way. And in the yard he dared the weeds to grow, manicured the lawn, pruned the shrubs, dead-headed the flowers, and painted the stones.

Now, in the Limited Company years, he no longer keeps his eyes down, and he no longer pretends not to listen to the cries, the groans, the pleas for mercy. It passes the time, since there is nothing much to do. Once the daily *Chronicle* has been read, re-read, and pored over by the entire unit (who have stopped typing reports on the one remaining typewriter, which is without ink for its ribbon and without paper for its battered keys), he uses it to plug holes. In the rainy season he catches rainwater leaks with the three last remaining utensils: an *Olivine* oil tin, a two litre plastic *Lions Dairy Maid* ice cream container, and a *Chibuku* scud. Mostly, however, and whitewash still seems to be available, he paints the stones; and while he paints, that tune comes back to him, and you can hear the cracked old voice going: 'Kooma-rai-ai-ai-yai-yai...kooma-rai-kooma-rookie-kooma-kai.'

Goat Song

I was chatting with my friend, Clair, who is a researcher for an NGO based in Bulawayo. She is working on a project to improve goat production for subsistence farmers in the more arid regions of Matabeleland. Her research takes her to some very remote areas where hunger and disease have become endemic.

Clair is also interested in literature and, on that particular evening in early September, the air rich with the scent of grass fires and syringa blossom, a bottle of local red wine and a plate of raw carrots (Clair's favourite snack) on the table before us, we discussed Ireland's contribution to 'English' literature. I pointed out jokingly that without the Irish and the gays (occasionally combined) there wouldn't be much 'English' literature to speak of. Even the Brontë sisters were half Irish. The conversation somehow got on to the playwright J. M. Synge, and his one-act tragedy, *Riders to the Sea*, which I had studied at university. I remembered our lecturer telling us that the life expectancy of fishermen on the Arran Islands was so brief that their coffins were built prior to their drownings. In the play, Maurya loses her husband and all six of her sons to the sea. I can still quote her haunting words: 'holding a thing in the half of a red sail, and water dripping out of it'. The story prompted Clair to tell me of an incident on a recent trip to the Nkayi area of Matabeleland. I replenished our glasses and she began.

'We came across this old woman, thin as a stick with bright, almost demented eyes, and a body permanently stooped in the posture of hoeing. Her compound was near Dakamela, on the Shangani River, and she was the sole remaining inhabitant. She told us that both her daughters had died –'

'Of AIDS?' I interrupted.

'Of AIDS and hunger. Her daughters and all her grandchildren. And her six sons had crossed the Limpopo to South Africa. This old woman was barely surviving on green paw paw fruit and a pod, which she called *ihabhaba* –'

'That's monkey bread. *Piliostigma thonningii*. She must have been desperate.'

‘Yes, but the surprising thing was that she owned twelve healthy billy goats: six black and six white. We asked her why she didn’t sell a couple of them in order to buy food, and she said they were not for sale; they were for her sons’ funerals. She was convinced that all their deaths would precede hers.

‘I assumed that the goats would be used for ritual purposes. You know, there is an *inkubalo* rite, which is performed a day after the burial. They kill a goat, mix it with herbs, and say a protective spell over it. Then they roast the meat and one by one the mourners take a bite of it, while the *inyanga* knocks their joints. This helps strengthen the family by driving away the fear of death, and bad luck in general.’

‘I thought they used an ox,’ I said, munching on a sweet, juicy carrot.

‘They do, the *ingovu*, but how many people own oxen these days? Then there is another ceremony called *umbuyiso*, which takes place before the rains start a year after death – stop crunching that carrot in my ear!’

‘Sorry.’

‘At sunset a goat is slaughtered, roasted, and eaten, just by the family; but before that it is taken to the grave and offered to the dead person—’

‘To appease him?’

‘Yes; and to persuade him to come home. It is driven back from the grave and killed. What the family don’t eat is left in a hut along with a calabash of beer and some snuff so that the spirits can feast and drink.’

‘So that was two goats for each son?’

‘Yes. I don’t know how she kept them so healthy. There was not a blade of grass for miles around, and very little foliage on the trees and shrubs. I’ve never seen such devastated land.’

‘Isn’t that what goats do?’

Clair bridled at my suggestion. She is an agronomist who knows her livestock, goats in particular. ‘It’s simply a matter of husbandry,’ she sniffed. ‘In any case, what ruined the land was generations of forced overcrowding because of the Land Apportionment Act and other draconian Settler policies.’

‘You’re right, there, Clair,’ I replied; ‘put it this way: you aren’t wrong.’

She told me to grow up, playfully stuffed a piece of carrot in my ear, took a sip of wine, and proceeded with her story. ‘Anyway, we commended the old woman for sticking to tradition in these terrible times, and you know what she said?’

‘What?’

‘She said it had little to do with tradition. The goats would be bartered to pay for her sons’ coffins. She had already ordered them from an undertaker’s in Bulawayo who had promised to deliver them to her door, so to speak, in return for the twelve goats. She showed us an elevated position where she would store the coffins, safe from termites.

‘One of our translators who’d stayed on to do follow-up work got back yesterday, and I asked him about the old woman. He said the coffins had arrived and the goats had gone. He’d helped her secure the coffins from termites, but what they hadn’t taken into consideration were the ZANU-PF militia, the so-called green bombers. These teenagers had secured a cow from a peasant farmer who had failed to deliver his meagre crop of mealies to the Grain Marketing Board, and were now looking for firewood to roast the beast. They accosted the old woman and demanded to see her ZANU-PF membership card. When she couldn’t produce one they beat her senseless and then ransacked her compound.

‘That night all twelve coffins went up in smoke.’

Have you ever choked on a piece of carrot? Thank God Clair knew how to execute the Heimlich Manoeuvre. In her arms at last!

Business is Business

They operate at night, like their familiars, the rats and the cockroaches. They come in three colours: brown, black, and white; but there's not it. They are unscrupulous opportunists who care for no one but themselves and, in sentimental moments, their children – possessions, after all. They take comfort in Jesus' words out of context: 'The poor always ye have with you', as only those without the compassion of Jesus can.

In the still hours, after the dogs have stopped yapping, but before the first cocks begin to crow, listen. You'll hear a sound of grumbling, a suburban belly-ache of a sound. It's the thirty ton trucks laden with the scarcest of commodities: cement, sugar, maize meal, cooking oil, petrol.... It's not easy for these monsters to negotiate driveways that were designed for motor cars, bicycles and pedestrians; but they manage. They knock down road signs, maim trees, mangle street lights, collapse culverts... but they manage. Let a poverty-stricken street vendor dare to be caught with an unopened packet of sugar and she will face the full wrath of the law. The sugar will be confis[ti]cated and the woman, probably a grandmother, will be beaten senseless.

But these ruthless exploiters of the suffering poor are safe; safe behind their concrete walls and sheet iron gates, dotted all over suburbia, as far away as possible from the Central Business District and the industrial sites. Each one enjoys the patronage of a cabinet minister or a governor or a high ranking officer in the army. Ask the local police to investigate these nocturnal goings on and they will decline. These are, after all, political matters.

And if you ever manage to get in touch with one of these wheeler-dealers – you'll find him at church, at the club, on the golf course, on the Board of some NGO, at so and so's wedding anniversary, at such and such a fund-raising event... but not in queues, never in queues – if you ever manage to get in touch with one, and ask him why, he'll give you a boyish smile and say, 'Business is business.'

Not for Satisfaction Gomarara your bulky commodities like cement and mealie meal. He needs no thirty ton truck to transport the

product that is rapidly making him one of the richest men in Zimbabwe. His BMW is quite adequate, thank you very much. Don't tell anyone, but Satis, as his clients like to call him, has a Swedish girl friend – well, not really a girl friend, they screw occasionally but they don't go out on dates – who works for the United Nations World Health Organization. Her job is to distribute ARVs to the many thousands of impoverished AIDS victims in Zimbabwe. And guess who (WHO) helps her distribute the drugs? Yes. And the Swedish lady, Valhalla Spunkstrom, trusts him, trusts him implicitly. Why shouldn't she? It would be downright racist for a white woman to mistrust a black man, especially when he's been intimate with her. Valhalla still blushes with pride when she remembers the hundreds of kronor their sponsored fuck raised for the Entumbane Old Peoples' Home that rainy day in Stockholm, only minutes after she and Satis had met for the first time. Not so successful had been the time when she and Satis 'did it' in front of an invited audience on the grave of Cecil John Rhodes. She had underestimated the respect Africans have for the dead – even for their enemies.

He lives down the road from me. I sometimes see him emerging from his sheet iron gate pushing a pram imported from Spain, which can be adjusted into a push-chair or a feeding chair or a cot. Satisfaction is clearly devoted to the contents of this protean wonder, as, item, four lips indifferent brown; item, four brown eyes, with lids to them; item, two necks, two chins, and so forth. Yes: twins. At other times he emerges with a pair of the largest, most vicious-looking dogs I have ever seen: Great Dane cross Boerbul, with a hint of Irish Wolf Hound. More frequently I have seen him behind the wheel of a custom-made, roofless *Landrover* accompanied by two very beautiful girls, one white, one brown. His, it seems, is a binary world. And you'd be surprised how young he is.

Among Satisfaction's clients, no fewer than thirty have names that are preceded by the title: 'honourable'. Many more are preceded by honorifics, which denote rank in either the civil or the armed forces. At least one is a 'His' something or other. Most of the others may be classified by the euphemism 'Company Director'. When Valhalla Spunkstrom had entrusted her fun-loving friend with the distribution

of ARVs throughout Zimbabwe, she briefed him on the particular need of impoverished women who now make up two thirds of the Zimbabweans infected with HIV. They have no power to stop their husbands (who frequently have multiple partners) from forcing sex on them without using condoms; no power to prevent transmission of the virus to their babies since they cannot afford breast milk substitutes; no power to help avert the shocking prediction that by 2010 there will be, worldwide, 25 million children orphaned by AIDS. Satisfaction produced the correct facial expressions during the briefing to reassure the warm-hearted Swede, and she sent him off with a genital squeeze and the first of many boxes full of Anti-Retro-Viral pills.

The first box earned him enough money to move into the house down the road from me. The second box earned him enough to surround it with concrete walls and electrified wire, and God knows what other security features. Then came the vehicles, the dogs, and many other accessories like pretty ladies, a lawned verge, and children. One Sunday morning I passed him on the road outside his gate. He was dressed in a powder blue safari suit, which did not conceal an incipient paunch. The chubby twins, one in either arm, were gurgling with contentment. We greeted each other, then I made a gesture towards his property and said, disingenuously, 'How do you do it?'

He gave me a boyish smile and replied, 'Business is business.'

White Man Crawling

It was to be a surprise – from those grateful commercial farmers, aka safari operators, who had managed to hold on to their most productive farms and so continue living in the lifestyle to which they had been accustomed since Independence: a lifestyle which did not exclude annual holidays in Alpine ski resorts, house boats on Lake Kariba, shopping sprees, in private jets, to Sandton City, and best of all, jamborees in their iconic 4 x 4s.

The venue was one home of Nols Bosluis, a beautiful Cape Dutch affair (not Nols, the home!), which overlooked the Sebakwe river deep in the Zimbabwe Midlands. Before the so-called Land Reform Programme Nols had owned seventeen farms, all but three of which he had since, in a spirit of patriotism and love of his fellow man (he would not admit to coercion), given to the government for purposes of re-settlement. They had duly been resettled, not by the peasants, but by the local honourable minister and his relatives. And that is the reason why Nols had been allowed to keep a few.

His son, Zuluboy, and his daughter, Swazigirl, had been flown back for the occasion, from their exclusive schools in South Africa. Delightful children, they never spoke, not even when spoken to, because they had become chronic cell-phone users with over-developed thumbs. His fellow commercial farmers, those few remaining on the land because they had done the sensible thing – stay loyal to the ruling party – were to contribute in their own humble ways. Bols would slaughter a hundred guinea fowl, Hols would shoot a kudu, Dols would de-stock the National Breweries, and Vols would use his fleet of vehicles to transport the VIPs, including the guest of honour. Their pretty wives (meaning the servants) would do the salads and the puddings.

Everybody except those few in the know took it for granted that the guest of honour would be the honourable minister. After all he had been so good to the remaining commercial, aka white, farmers. Hadn't he allowed them to sponsor his recent election campaign against those losers the MDC? Hadn't he condescended to receive from these patriotic sons of the more arable soil, tankers of petrol and diesel,

truckloads of maize meal and elephant meat, bowsters of opaque beer? And hadn't he, consequently, won the seat? But Nols had a surprise for his guests, a big – indeed an enormous – surprise!

Long after the guests had assembled at the Bosluis's Cape Dutch farmhouse, the honourable minister and his entourage arrived. Nols called out, 'Greetings Comrade Honourable Minister. I have kept you a bottle of your favourite Scotch whisky, *Chivas Regal*.'

'My friend, Nols,' the honourable minister replied, 'and I have brought you assurances from above that you may keep your remaining farms for the time being.'

Then Nols, all six foot four of him, did an amazing thing. He performed a ritual that had not been witnessed since the days of King Lobengula. He walked on his knees, bottle of whisky held high, right across the front lawn of the house, to the honourable minister. His cartilages could be heard creaking (old rugby injuries) from as far away as the river front where crickets in their numbers began to accompany the sound. To rapturous applause, the honourable minister received his gift with noble condescension. Those guests who thought that this was the climax of the party were delightfully mistaken. What's that rattling sound in the distance? Are those riverside crickets on steroids? No, it's a helicopter, Vols's pride and joy, and it's bringing the real guest of honour. Men, women and children form a huge circle on the lawn, and the helicopter lands in the middle of it. Wind generated by the propeller blows deliciously in all directions, discomposing hairdos and caftans, and threatening to trash Baby Bosluis's coleslaw. The helicopter disgorges... no it can't be! How did Nols manage it? You don't get much higher in the political hierarchy than this. It's not a name to be bandied about, but we can tell you that the guest of honour appears to be a woman, with a voice like a trumpeter hornbill. For two hours, standing at the foot of the helicopter, flanked by half a dozen bodyguards, she trumpets on about the girl child, then about AIDS, then about Operation Garikayi (she can't remember the Ndebele equivalent), then about, of all things, water pumps!

Where's Nols, by the way? What's he been doing during the speech? Where the heck is mine host? Arms and the man, we sing! He

appears from the darkness with a bullock in tow, a large black bullock. He leads it to within metres of the trumpeter hornbill. Then, seemingly out of nowhere he draws a butcher's knife. The bodyguards feel for their weapons. The party is silent. Even the crickets down by the river have ceased their clamour. Then the ejaculations as Nols expertly kills the bullock and tears out its still pulsating heart. This he offers to the real guest of honour who politely declines and asks if she couldn't rather have a piece of *Kentucky Fried Chicken* with chips and tomato sauce.

Sonnet with One Unstated Line

See the shambling gait of the unemployed,
the vacant stare of the dispossessed;
the plastic bags by breezes buoyed
or, when evening settles, at rest.
Hear the cry of hornbills lost in yards
of rubble and rags, to split the ears
of those who stand and watch; and the guards
unguarded, hammering, hammering.
Smell the blood and mucous, ashes damp;
breath of birds turned children clamouring,
children clamouring. A tyrant's stamp:
a boot, a fist, a fourteen pounder:
come and witness our city flounder.

Hornbills in My Garden

Reborn I am among the hungry ghosts;
again I hear the hornbill's plaintive cry;
attended to once more by all the hosts
of heaven and of hell. 'Cast a cold eye'
says the poet, but I am too attached.
Hornbills by the number have come crying
into town; yellow-grey and dusty, hatched
in coffins of mopane wood, flying
high then dipping like soup ladles; crashing
bashing in the branches tall, calling... call
me to the table, serve me, kiss me, sing
to me. God have mercy on me, and all
he has to disobedience consigned,
and don't forget to kill me once I've dined.

Snowman

The night before our departure we had dinner with the Afrikaans teacher, Miss Devine. She was a seasoned traveller; she had some good tips for us. 'Take long johns with you,' she said, 'and never accept a drink that has already been poured from the bottle. You never know what they might have laced it with.' She exploited the feature of definiteness in the fricative 'they', held it for a longer period than usual between her tongue and her dentures. The pressure slightly dislodged the latter, producing a whistling sound as of kettles boiling.

'More pumpkin, boys?' We politely declined a third helping of the sweet orange pulp flavoured with nutmeg. We wanted to keep some space for dessert, Miss Devine's speciality: pumpkin fritters rolled in sugar and cinnamon. The Afrikaans teacher was no pushover when it came to pumpkin recipes. Her jaundiced complexion was a result, not of an obstructed bile duct or of some liver disease like hepatitis, but of the regular consumption of enormous quantities of pumpkin.

'How are your drinks? Let me banish the daylight from your glasses.' This joke was not weakened by the fact that it was late in the evening, the crepuscular time when *eros* and *thanatos* merge in the imagery of light and shade... even though the Christmas beetles had not gone to bed, and at least one Heuglin's robin was concurring with Miss Devine's admonition to 'take warm things...take warm things...take warm things...'. We gladly offered our glasses for a refill. There was no denying the potency of Miss Devine's home-made peach brandy, which she called *mampoer*, and which gave her nose a reddish glow. This, combined with her cupreous cheeks, reminded many of her admiring pupils past and present of the warm end of the visible spectrum.

'And another thing boys - if you ever get the urge to spend a penny out in the open, do it through a sock. Otherwise your *dinguses* [things] will snap off. I tell you, it's going to be cold enough to freeze the brass off a bald monkey. Isn't that how the English expression goes?' We thought it did. 'Dress warm boys; which reminds me; I've got something for you.' She bustled off down the passage while we sipped away at the liquid lightning in our glasses; which was

reciprocated by a real bolt from the sky. It, briefly, restored the daylight Miss Devine had so hubristically banished. A stifling, pre-storm lull was seeping into our necks and armpits.

The Afrikaans teacher returned with gifts for each of us: body belts made from two of her old bras, and knitted tea cosies, brown and yellow for me, blue and red for my friend. Both sported green pompons, so large that they tilted to one side. We were to wear them on our heads, day and night because ‘As long as your head is warm, you will survive the bitter European winter. *Janee - ’n warm kop, ’n warm dop, en julle sal deurkom.*’ [yes no – a warm head, a warm shot, and you’ll make it]

Our Rhodesian education had fully prepared us to sample the cultural delights of Europe: we wanted to get hold of as much pornography as possible and, in a more sentimental vein, we wanted to visit the real Kensington Gardens where our favourite literary character, Peter Pan, had been conceived. We dreamed of the Broad Walk, the Round Pond, rhododendrons, and the River Serpentine. But we dreamed even more of pussy, nay, we were obsessed by it.

‘So, what do you boys intend seeing while you are in Europe? I muttered something about the Popadopoulos, and my friend thought we might visit the Eiffel Flats. The seasoned traveller, Miss Devine, gently corrected us. She then went on to recommend Delville Wood in Belgium where two of her uncles had perished in the First World War, the Rhodesian Ridgeback Society in Vienna, and the statue of Jannie Smuts in London.

Neither of us had experienced snow, except for the stuff you see in a deep freeze, which doesn’t really count; and the balls of cotton wool on our Christmas trees, which also doesn’t really count. There was, of course, no shortage of literary snow in our colonial education, driven, flurried, and flaked by conscientious expatriate teachers. There were the ‘snows of yesteryear’; there was the cherry, ‘hung with white upon the bough’; there was Mary’s little lamb ‘whose fleece was white as snow’; and, in the bleak mid-winter of Christina Rossetti’s bitter imagination, there was ‘snow on snow, / snow on snow’. My friend was particularly excited about building a snowman with a carrot for a nose and two pieces of coal for eyes. You could almost hear him

thinking where the blue and red tea cosy with a green pompon would end up. Miss Devine called him Frosty, and the name stuck.

I was gagging on my third pumpkin fritter when the lightning grew more intense, and the thunder: five, then four, then three, then two counts away. Down came the rain, up wafted the scent of Africa: sweetening dust. The temperature around the dining room table immediately cooled, and we all cheered the glorious downpour. Before departing we helped the Afrikaans teacher put pots, pans, enamel basins, and other assorted containers underneath the many places where her house leaked; helped shut windows; helped comfort terrified pets; helped the old lady on with her much travelled raincoat, which she liked to call a mackintosh, since she had purchased it many years before in Scotland, birthplace of Andrew Murray, founder of her beloved Dutch Reformed Church.

With a '*Lekker ry*, [pleasant journey] my billy boys,' Miss Devine, the retired Afrikaans teacher, now in her eighties, kissed and hugged us goodbye. She had accompanied us all the way to the gate. We promised to send her a post card from each of our destinations, our first, and as it turned out, our last, being Zürich, Switzerland.

Looking, I guess, ridiculous in our tea cosies and our Matabeleland rugby jerseys, Frosty and I eventually arrived (it was late evening) in Zürich, Switzerland. We were indeed stunned by the cold, so cold that there was more ice than snow on the ground. It made us gasp. When we left Bulawayo Airport, waved all the way into the sky by our loving moms and dads and brothers and sisters, the temperature had been squatting in the shade at 37 degrees centigrade. Here it was minus 20 degrees centigrade. Our *dinguses* virtually disappeared. Frosty would get to build his snowman.

We found a cheap downtown hotel, on the advice of *Europe on Ten Dollars a Day*, and soon settled in, although the oompah band downstairs was pretty hair raising, and we were shocked at the price of food and drink. What little money we had, we decided, would be spent on our main reason for taking this trip: sex. The real thing, while preferable to pornography, was a little too daunting for us at this stage, though we could not take our eyes off the oompah groupies. Not far

from the hotel was a flea pit of a cinema, which advertised a double-bill. We had little Afrikaans and less German but we could get the gist of the titles: *Ich bin ein Nymphomaniac* and *Mädchen mit öffnen Lippe*. Besides there was nothing ambiguous about the accompanying stills.

On the way to the cinema we passed a small shop which advertised bananas at what seemed to be a reasonable price. We decided that we should eat something since the double billing was likely to prove a marathon. I could count to ten in German and I knew how to say 'please' but I was darned if I knew the word for bananas. Perhaps it was the same as the Afrikaans, *piesangs*. I persuaded Frosty to go in and make the order, while I waited outside. I was a real coward. I said, 'Just say, "*Zwei piesangs, bitte?*" and point to the bananas.' I watched Frosty through the shop window. He approached a burly Viking of a woman, said the words and pointed to the bananas. She didn't seem to understand him, and I watched him repeat the words. Suddenly she gave him such a bang on the side of his head that his tea cosy fell off. When she started making teutonic screams we ran for it.

'What was that all about?' I asked Frosty once I'd managed to get my breath back in the freezing cold of the street. He didn't know. He thought it may have been the Afrikaans word, which she might have taken as an insult. He grumbled at me for getting him into that fix.

The first film was *Mädchen mit öffnen Lippe*. We gasped, but not with cold. It was during a particularly sizzling scene, which involved among other curious items, a gigantic syringe, that Frosty fainted against my side. I managed to revive him but he said he could no longer watch the movie. He would wait for me outside. I should have gone out with him and taken him to the hotel but I was desperate to see the movie through.

I barely gave Frosty a thought when I decided to watch the second feature, which began after a ten minute interval. My throat was dry with lust, and I had a banana of an erection. A woman official with a discreet torch walked up and down the rows of seats to make sure that there was no hanky panky going on. She had already thrown out an elderly man in a trench coat.

Then there was an unscheduled, free, third feature. I couldn't believe my good fortune. It was called *Der Teufel in Fräulein Divine*, and it featured a hollowed out pumpkin! O the long arm of coincidence! I half expected to see the ochreous Afrikaans teacher in a supporting role. The previous two films would have been classified as soft porn; this was the real thing [*dingus*]. This wasn't maids, turned bottles, calling aloud for corks; this was maids well and truly corked. Meanwhile, the woman official with the transferred epithet in her hand was kept busy evicting transgressors in what Miss Devine would have called mackintoshes.

It was only after this bonus third feature had ended and I had taken a few minutes for subsidence to occur, that I remembered Frosty. He would have gone back to the hotel. Surely? I found him on the pavement outside the cinema, in a sitting position, covered in snow. His tea cosy was slightly awry. His eyes were black, like shiny pieces of coal, and his nose had taken on the brittle texture of a carrot. Coins were strewn about him. I counted thirty. Frosty was frozen stiff; quite dead.

Master

When we found Roland Clarke dead in his armchair, one of the great mysteries of maNyoni's life was solved. She had been Roland's maid – I believe 'domestic worker' is the more politically correct term – for nearly forty years, first in Gwanda, then in Plumtree, now in Bulawayo. She called him 'Master', not because schoolmastering was his profession but as a synonym of 'Duce' or 'Fuehrer' or 'Shogun'.... Roland Clarke had been a History teacher. He had done time as Principal of a primary school in Gwanda, Head of Department at a secondary school in Plumtree, and, until his death, Deputy Headmaster of a secondary school in Bulawayo.

Roland Clarke MA had been a confirmed bachelor, terrified of the female sex, starting with his mother, Thalestris Q. Clarke PhD, one of whose less hyperbolic nicknames was Harridan of Hillside. Apparently she had forced her son to wear a bib at mealtimes well into his twenties. Miss Tweet, Head of English, had called him a misogynist and compared him with the eighteenth century British satirist, Alexander Pope, who once remarked: 'Men, some to business, some to pleasure take, / But every woman is at heart a rake'. The fact that Miss Tweet exemplified Pope's sentiments was neither here nor there. No one in the staff room allowed her to forget the time she was caught in her stock room with Metalwork; nor the time she was caught in the cricket pavilion with Management of Business; nor the time she was caught, precariously on the roof of the music room, with Design and Technology.

Roland was the epitome of neatness. The one thing he could not abide in a pupil was a shirt untucked. A boy caught bullying would be warned; a boy caught cheating would be threatened; but a boy caught with his shirt tail hanging out of his trousers would be beaten with a metre length of reinforced hosepipe. The Master's sartorial trim has been well documented in any number of school magazines, Speech Night eulogies, and PTA meetings. I recall a newsletter, which went into rhapsodies over his footwear: strong outdoor shoes with wingtips and perforated toecaps, known to the initiated as Oxford brogues. He had worn them from the moment his feet had stopped growing at the

age of sixteen – the number of times they had been re-soled over the years.

His jacket and trousers were tailor-made – no zips, damn you! – of a grey flannel material, famous for outlasting its wearer. His shirts, invariably white (off-white if the truth be told), with long sleeves and stiff (fraying if the truth be told) collars. His favourite tie sported the logo of his Alma Mater, the University of Rhodes, Grahamstown, South Africa, or ‘The Union’, as Roland persisted in calling our southern neighbour. Nobody except, perhaps, maNyoni, could describe his underwear, but I imagined it to be loose and cottony.

The one thing maNyoni could never understand about her obsessively neat and tidy employer was that he always left his wardrobe door open. It was almost the only work she had to do some days – close the wardrobe door. The dishes would be washed and put away, the floors would be swept, the furniture would be dusted, the garbage bin would be emptied, the pets would be fed. Roland Clarke, to the disgust of maNyoni, loved pets, and he kept many of them: dogs, cats, birds, fish, and a miniature goat called Randolph who wreaked havoc in the home and the garden. He ate, banged, ate, banged, from morn to dewy eve. He ate things that stood still, like plants, clothes, and newspapers, and banged things that moved, like dogs, cats, chickens, and maNyoni’s legs. Once, in an act that can only be described as rape, he mounted the moving back wheel of the Master’s 1956 *Austin Westminster*.

The boys loved gruff old Mr Clarke. Once, when he had to beat a junior for not pulling up his stockings on school premises, the blubbing child, after receiving two of the best, turned around and hugged him. Older boys invariably thanked him after receiving – not cuts, not with a piece of reinforced hosepipe, thwocks, rather – after receiving thwocks from the Deputy Headmaster. They liked him for his predictability, for his caricaturability; above all, for the fact that he genuinely liked them. He was even more popular than the recently graduated Physical Education teacher who allowed them to smoke during his lessons, and went drinking with them over the weekends. I, too, was fond of the old fart, with all his old-fashioned ways. His

presence made me feel unaccountably nostalgic. There was something of the *ubi sunt* about him – a vanished past.

When maNyoni found him dead in his chair, she phoned the school. I happened to be free at the time, so I offered to go to his house and make the necessary arrangements. I found maNyoni wringing her hands and muttering ‘*Maye, bakithi!*’ over and over. She took me to his bedroom. He was slumped in his armchair, a barely sipped gin and tonic on a coaster on the side table. And there he was again, reflected in the full length mirror on the inside of his wardrobe door – slumped in his armchair, a barely sipped gin and tonic on a coaster, on the side table. ‘You see, maNyoni,’ I said as I gently closed the wardrobe door, ‘we all need company, even the loneliest of us.’

Rosewater

He was not exactly camp, not visually anyway; but he saturated himself with the sweet scent of roses, a scent that remained in the classroom even when he wasn't there. I didn't mind; in fact I rather enjoyed it; it seemed to have a calming effect on the more rowdy boys. His nickname was Rosewater.

I had known he was gay. In the third term of his second year at school he had written me a deeply embarrassing composition entitled 'To Sir with Love'. I doubt if anyone else beyond his intimate friends knew, since, in his culture, homosexuality was taboo. It was a colonial thing, a white thing; it was unAfrican. There certainly wasn't anything effeminate about the way he threw a discus or put a shot. And, while he permeated scrum after scrum, ruck after ruck, maul after maul, with attar of roses, it was not thurification which won him, two years running, full colours for rugby in a rugby-obsessed school. He looked macho, behaved macho, talked macho... but he smelled of *rosa damascena*.

He carried it around with him in a plastic atomiser, the kind gardeners use to spray insecticide on plants. He used it sparingly in cooler weather, but when it was hot - and it is hot most of the time in this part of the world - he sprayed it all over him and all round him. Our incense-bearer.

It happened when Rosewater was in his final year at high school. He was a senior prefect and captain of the athletics team; he was one of the school's best academics. I'll never forget that night as long as I live, and I'll never know what, finally, pushed him to do it. Later, much later, come to think of it, I was reminded of Auden's lines:

About suffering they were never wrong,
the Old Masters: how well they understood
its human position; how it takes place
while someone else is eating or opening a window
or just walking dully along.

How art informs life! I was probably doing one of those mindless things when it took place. Forty years now, a man among schoolboys,

a lower case old master; eating the leftover wing of a chicken filched from the cook matron's pantry; or opening the window of my single room in the hostel to let in a fresh supply of sewage-and-deodorant, socks-and-chlorine, floor polish-and-orange peel scented air: the redolence of boarding school; or, yes, just walking dully along.

Why not me? Why this aromatic golden boy?

I happened to be on duty. There came a breathless banging on my door. Two or three juniors, whimpering like puppies. Sir, Sir! Come quick! It's Rosewater. He's dead! In the bath! He's dead, Sir! Please, Sir, come quick! It's 'quickly', not 'quick'! Don't you know the difference between an adjective and an adverb? What do you mean he is dead? If this is one of your sick jokes.... No joke, Sir. It's true. Please....

When I found that he was indeed dead in the bath, as I groped for the slightest sign of life, the jugular, the carotid, the mutilated wrists; and as I too began whimpering like the juniors cowering behind me, I was struck by something almost numinous. The characteristic smell of Rosewater had metamorphosed into a sight incarnadine, which gurgled away as I pulled the rubber plug.

Home Sweet Home

When Grant Terrier heard that his father, Foxie, and last remaining relative in Zimbabwe, had died at the Edith Duly Home for the elderly, he decided to revisit his past, and attend the funeral for which, since his grandfather had become destitute, he had to pay. All Zimbabweans who relied on pensions to support them had become destitute, and those who weren't kept going by the Western Union simply turned their faces to the wall and died. Very few actually drank insecticide or packed their grizzled heads in *SPAR* plastic bags and left them there. Most simply stopped living.

When James 'Foxie' Terrier retired in 1995 his monthly pension amounted to the princely sum of \$10 000. He was rich. He was a paid up member of the Bulawayo Golf Club. He had accounts at Haddon and Sly and Highfield Pharmacy. Once a week he dined out at Maxies or New Orleans. What more could an old man want? Ten years later that same monthly pension bought him one third of an English cucumber.

Grant was a Kitchener High old boy, so his first trip down memory lane, after the funeral, was to that august institution, in a Bulawayo suburb called Lobengula. Grant had played first team cricket and hockey, but the sport at which he had excelled was squash (he still proudly wore his Colours blazer on special occasions), and Kitchener High was the only school in Bulawayo that, in those days, boasted a squash court built to international standards. The funding had been provided by a deeply committed Parent-Teachers' Association.

Grant decided to walk from the suburban Guest House where he was staying, and this partly prepared him for the shock to come. He made his way along cycle tracks, which had become obstacle courses, and diagonal dirt paths strewn with litter by the binful. There were as many crows in the sky as there had been storks in his school days; as many rats in the grass as there had been hares. A smell of damp ash lingered in his nostrils.

School was in session when he got to the main gate. The same sign, barely legible on a surface of rust and dents and peeling paint. Hundreds of children were milling about, unsupervised but well

behaved on what, in Grant's time, had been called the Top Field. It was now a dust bowl. So was the Oval, the erstwhile First Team cricket ground. Except for a few curious looks from idle pupils, Grant was able to wander about the grounds uninterrupted. Memories flooded his consciousness, the unpleasant ones taking him somewhat by surprise. Top Field was where fights took place, and where new boys had to run a gauntlet of leather cadet boot laces, wet towels, and stockings filled with sand. Top Field was where, Saturday after Saturday in the miserable winter term, the pupils, dressed in their Number Ones, were obliged to watch rugby and scream war cries until their throats ached and their straw-bashed heads pounded.

Only one of the eight tennis courts was still operational, and that, barely. The all-weather surface was cracked and potholed, and the white markings had virtually disappeared. (He remembered the hours he had spent over weekends playing ball-boy for the terrifying prefects). On either side of a pitiful rag of a net six boys, three to a side, were having great fun with a single smooth – cracked, if the low bounce and hollow sound was anything to go by – tennis ball. The olympic size swimming pool looked as if it had been empty for many years. There were certainly many generations of frogs, rats, chameleons, lizards and beetles, decayed, dead, and alive, on its cracked and peeling floor. Grant quickly pushed aside a memory of being almost drowned there by a serial bully from Shabani whose name he did not care to remember.

While Grant was shaking his head at the once magnificent school hall, now in a sad state of disrepair, a gentleman dressed in a tailored three-piece suit approached him, introduced himself and asked if he could help him in any way. While Grant explained his business, the gentleman withdrew a white handkerchief of a silken texture from his trousers' pocket and proceeded to dust his Italian-style leather shoes. His hair, Grant noticed, was sleek with Vaseline, and on the second finger of his left hand was an onyx inlaid gold ring. Dapper was the word that occurred to Grant Terrier.

The gentleman returned the handkerchief to his pocket and then held out his hand for Grant to shake – the African way – which always caught Grant unawares, resulting in a bungle, and that made him feel

vaguely guilty. ‘You see,’ said the gentleman, ‘things are far much better now.’

‘But –’

‘Our schools are open to everyone; not the privileged few. We are now having democracy. All are equal.’

‘But why is everything so run down, Mr O’Magate? I mean, check this hall. When was it last painted? And what’s happened to the swimming pool, the tennis courts, the playing fields...?’

The head smiled patiently before replying. ‘Money, you know, is in short supply. There have been successive droughts. Your people – Blair... Bush – have imposed sanctions on Zimbabwe. They are punishing us for giving the land back to its rightful people. We are struggling against an imperialist conspiracy to keep us subjugated.’

‘The farm invasions took place only a few years ago. Kitchener High School looks as if it hasn’t had any maintenance since Independence.’

‘That is an incorrect statement, but however, this is not the time for quarrelling, Mr Grant. Perhaps you, as an old boy, will find a way of acquiring paint for our buildings.’

‘Some years ago I sent a thousand Australian dollars to the school for the express purpose of maintaining your squash court. I’d heard that it was being used as a lavatory. You spent the money on a workshop!’

‘By the way! Ah, but it was before my time. That must be Mr D’Mpopfu, who is now late. But you are wrong about the squash court, Mr Grant. It has been converted into a cottage for our Maintenance Engineer, Com... er... Mr FitzNcube.’

Grant asked the head if he could look around his old hostel, Arsenal House. Mr O’Magate, distracted by the arrival of a beautiful young woman (teacher? parent? secretary?) with an exposed navel and a Cleopatra style hair piece, gave his permission, and Grant wandered over to the place that had been his home for six years.

Only the first three letters of the proud old name could be made out; and the word ‘house’ had lost its ‘s’ and part of its ‘u’, so now it read ‘hole’. Grant had been Head of House in his final year. He wandered through what had been the junior prep room. A few

photographs of boys and staff still clung dustily to the walls, including one of his first year at Kitchener High. There he was, twelve years old, looking like a frightened rabbit. He recalled most of the seventy odd faces including the serial bully from Shabani. What was his name? Some of the old tables were there still, around which the boys had not studied for many a test, not completed their homework assignments, not written letters home; but had carved their names, splashed ink, and fiddled with sharp instruments.

After some searching he found his grandfather's name, 'Yorkie', dated 1914. Then he found his father's name, 'Foxie', also dated: 1939. At last he found his own name, so deeply carved that the 'S' in 'Staffie' had gone right through the table top. It was undated. His surname was incomplete: 'Terr'. The hostel master had caught him in the act, and beaten the living daylights out of him. 'I hope this will teach you a lesson, young Terrier,' he had said before commencing the onslaught.

'That I must not vandalise government property, Sir?'

'No. That you must not get caught!'

When Grant 'Staffie' Terrier walked pensively away from his alma mater, he was accompanied by the words of a song, not from his own lips, though he had sung it often as a child, but from the school choir, which had assembled in the quad outside the dilapidated hall, and which was being conducted by no less a personage than the head, Comrade 'Mister' O'Magate:

Mid pleasures and palaces though we may roam,
Be it ever so humble, there's no place like home;
A charm from the sky seems to hallow us there,
Which, seek through the world, is ne'er met with elsewhere.
Home, home, sweet, sweet home!
There's no place like home...

Not very tunefully, Grant picked up the refrain... 'no place like home...there's no place like home....'

Twelve Sonnets on a Conventional Theme

Men are the fools of the women they love.
African Proverb

Inspiration

Friedrich Schiller, in order to compose,
kept a few rotten apples near his nose;
Wystan Auden drank endless cups of tea;
a woman much missed is what does for me.
Valery waits for an image from God,
une ligne donnee; Spender gets the nod
from coffee; De la Mare puffed on the weed;
a woman much missed is all I need.

A woman much missed, my inspiration:
sister-goddess, Erato is her name,
daughter of Zeus and Mnemosyne;
killing me tenderly with creation,
playing in earnest a dangerous game.
A woman much missed is what does for me.

une ligne donnee - a gift from God of one line or one idea

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Poolside Rilke

Such comfort on the couch uncomfortable,
such gazing by a lovesick moon on hands
entwined like mating cobras. And the still
red frog, and the still read poet, understands
what we cannot, may not, should not, would not
understand – save the white candle burning,
the scent of smoke, of aloe, of long hot
summers to come. Ineffable yearning.

*‘Leben und Tod.’ Liebestod. Liebe girl,
liebevolle girl. ‘Hold me in your sweet
embrace’, relax me, then slowly unfurl
fingers, glasses, noses, arms, elbows, feet...
return the moon’s gaze. ‘Doch in-der-Welt sein’-
diesen Überfluss - mine yours and yours mine.*

Leben und Tod - life and death

Liebestod - love/death

Liebe girl – dear

liebevolle - loving

Doch in-der-Welt sein - something like ‘be’ in the philosophical sense

diesen Überfluss - this abundance

Schattierung

After Karl Hofer

Will you be my shadow against the moon
emerging naked from the distant hills
where light like liquid alabaster spills,
and crosses tilt, turn spiky ... will you, soon?
Will you shelter me from the sun at noon
as it drives its fist through my floppy hat,
as it renders me down to marrow-fat
in a pot of primal soup ... will you, soon?

Shall I be your dusk on a couch too small,
the dryish white wine you forget to sip
though something liquid lingers on your lip -
like moonlight, clouds drifting, the ghostly call
of memories recalled - on your cheek, brow,
spectacles, extending hair ... shall I, now?

Untitled

Mother, daughter, sister, lover, dear friend:
not my beginning, since there is no
beginning; not, since there is none, my end.
Eyes, sudden behind their spectacles, go
through me, stop at me, agitate beyond....
Tidy ears, hear me but listen for
other voices (behind their pendants) fond
and demeaning, ever and never more.

Stranger from another land, another
life, another family; strange spices,
incense strange. Friend, sister, daughter, mother,
brief companion, enduring my crisis,
my breaking stones to make a beginning
when there is no beginning, no ending.

Todunglücklich Sein

It was meant to be a hyperbolic
joke, a game with your seven-year old child,
a catch-me-if-you-can monster-frolic,
the cannibalistic ogre beguiled
by the pubertal Jack. Fee fi fo fum,
ich bin todunglücklich says Donald Duck;
strangled quack; Chicken-Licken goes, cluck, cluck,
cluck. Smell the smell of an Englishman's bum.
Now, no more children's games: I really am heart-
broken. The word took a sinister turn:
me towards, and you away, from this thing,
which no one can define, can even start
to define, and it isn't your concern,
though I wait, still, for the telephone's ring.

Todunglücklich Sein - to be heartbroken

Goodbye and Hello

I say goodbye to the mouth I have kissed,
to the nose I have rubbed, to the elbows
I have pinched, (to those portions that I missed).
I say goodbye to the pool so blue, those
trees, that aloe, the murky red frog,
the uncomfortable couch, the distant moon,
the beautiful child, the nip of a dog:
the shadows that lifted, and fell, too soon.

I say hello to hollowness, I say
hello to emptiness; a vacuum I
greet, a great big gap in the gaping day.
Hello to silence, hello to goodbye
to post box, the cranky electric gate:
the shadows that lifted, and fell, too late.

Jealousy

I stood upon a thorn that pierced my heart,
and the thin red line of poisoned blood
began to creep creep creep like a cricket
in the rain. There he was, my girl, grinning.
Three of my head's corners, though but a part
of my foot, recorded it. In the mud
of weekend rain - billy goat - seamed in sweat.
And you in the pale blue moonlight spinning
shadows. That hole in my foot kept burning
the white candle, kept breathing the aloe
vera slime that heals mild eruptions. Creep,
creep, like a cricket in my brain. Turning
then to the rutting, butting man, you go
your way, and I beg God to let me sleep.

Love's Rhymes

With Keats, thinking of the girl he could not have, it was like a spear going through him; with me it's the neck of a broken bottle twisting my entrails. The oldest torture in the world is the torture got by unrequited love. It's coloured blue and is accompanied by a token: *du Ring am meinem Finger*. There's no rest, no respite from the tyranny of rhyme for love's sake – words, turds, birds – but the poet, John Keats, was dying, literally dying in his own excrement; the fool of time, so young, coals heaped in his breast. I know it is over, time to stop sighing, crying.

du Ring am meinem Finger - ring on my finger

Chiaroscuro with One Unrhymed Line

You give and you take, like the ocean; you
hurt then you give succour; you venture near
the circle of light, then you disappear
into shadows, a pall of wispy blue
smoke from the tapped butt of a cigar. True
today, untrue tomorrow; eyes turned down
in your offerings of snacks and beer,
turned up in the constant hullabaloo
of your compound, where Aid and Domestic
Workers mix; children and the elderly;
dogs and fowls. You minister to the sick
and the healthy, the enslaved and the free.
Like Jesus, you give and you take away:
light in my darkness; darkness in my day.

.

Poolside Braai

The NGO, beer in hand, prods a length
of sausage. Proprietorially
he rests his eyes on the girl I love. She
plays a game of catch with her daughter in
the swimming pool. I watch him watching her
and wonder if she is aware. The child
is screaming with delight, kicking her feet,
testing to the limit her mother's strength,
who pretends to drown though glancing briefly,
wide-eyed, at the two of us. Can she see,
under the water (love her freckled skin),
can she smell, taste ... can she hear the sputter
of sausages grilling? He's reconciled.
Much later, once I have gone, he will eat.

She Turned Away

She turned away, but it's Christmas Eve,
the bleakest ever though the rains come down
and I am, after all, the local clown;
so let's not spoil the party, let's not grieve,
let's drink a toast and then another. She
turned away, but hell, it's raining, pouring,
the old man is boring; and children sing:
'*stille Nacht, heilige Nacht*'. Memory

tricks my eyes into starting heavy tears
but I swallow them as a bitter pill,
with beer, pull a smile, hold hands for grace
while a pot-bellied St Nicholas leers
at the sweets on the Christmas tree. All's still.
Now she carries the sunlight on her face.

stille Nacht, heilige Nacht - silent night, holy night

Setting Free

The moon foundered like a stricken galleon
and went down, dragging with it all my hopes
of domestic bliss. Down the distant slopes
of the world it listed and creaked as, one
by one, its lights went out like a village
going to bed. Darkness then enshrouded
me in a prickle of dotage, clouded
me in maundering fluff, until the rage

to live again bobbed like Ishmael's coffin
to the surface, caught the light of the sun
rising, its spreading warmth, like the happy
surprise on the face of a girl not in
love but *of* love. So now I have begun,
still deeply in thrall, to set myself free.

An Act of Terror

A baker's dozen of the more committed ZANU-PF Women's League were gathered on the stoep of a palatial farmhouse in the Mazoe Valley. The farm, once a highly productive citrus estate, was now used as a weekend retreat by five hundred pounder Amai Pretty Karigamombi-O'Dare. She could shamble, just, but she required the assistance of two powerful bodyguards to lift her into and out of sitting or reclining positions. Her friend, present at this meeting, and wife of the Minister of Spare Parts (Pretty's husband was only a Governor) had ceased walking, but she could still roll and, occasionally, slump. Her name was Lovely Bumbu-McBhambu-Dzvova. The lightest woman there, wife of the Deputy Minister of Workshops, Conferences, and Heroesplushes, weighed in at a pitiful three hundred pounds. To her shame, she could still walk. Her name was Loveliness Vandzihwa

The purpose of the meeting was to help the government sort out its fuel crisis. Food was not a problem. Witness the boxes of *Kentucky Fried Chicken* and chips that were strewn all over the stoep. Sweetness Chamupupuri had brought out this favourite food of the Women's League in her husband's army helicopter. The pilot had been sent back to Harare with orders to bring out more of the same, plus as many crates of coca cola as the helicopter could carry. No, food was not a problem, especially since the government's Operation Murambatsvina had made available to members of the Women's League, Youth Brigade, police, army and other patriotic groups, fruits and vegetables, seized from filthy vendors, at give-away prices. But fuel was a problem, especially now that even members of the Politburo had to leave their *Mercedes Benzes* at home and seek, shudder, public transport!

The idea came from another half-tonner, Graciouslady Zvambarara-Boomdeeay, wife of a senior CIO operative who may not be named. They had all listened with reverence to the Minister of Fuel Procurement and Vaseline suggesting exciting alternatives like peanut butter, ethanol, and oil from coal. To help them listen with reverence they swathed themselves in metre upon metre of cotton, printed with

portraits of our beloved Leader. These bolts of cloth could prove dangerous. Wasn't Pritty O'Tititi expelled from the Women's League for not noticing that one of her portraits was upside down? And wasn't Donalbain 'pump my tyres' Pombera disappeared for having one of hers in the vicinity of her jumping castle?

Graciouslylady got the idea after a drumstick binge, which built up so much gas inside her that she levitated two centimetres above her waterbed. When the gas began to escape, shifting her laterally and then bringing her down to earth, so to speak, she realised its potential as a source of energy for driving tanks, armoured cars, and bulldozers in the government's mission to purge its cities of those ungrateful human maggots, the poor. She it was who designed the plastic gas bags called Vhuvhuta, which the Minister of Fuel Procurement urged the people of Zimbabwe to utilize. At collection points all over the country, modified bowzers were ready to receive gas manufactured in the stomachs of patriotic Zimbabweans. Peasants were encouraged to eat more cabbage, whites to eat more baked beans, and 'coloureds' and Indians to eat more savoury meatballs. And for the nouveau riche, *Kentucky Fried Chicken* with chips soaked in tomato sauce, and lashings of *Coca Cola*.

The women at the gathering on the stoep of Amai Pretty's farmhouse had volunteered to test a more efficient method of collecting the gas. The experiment was conducted by Joint Operations. The women were attached by means of flexible plastic tubes and rather ticklish grommets to a petrol bowser; and while they chatted away about what geniuses their sons were and what ladies their daughters were; what fun they'd had in Sun City and the Seychelles; how ungrateful their servants were; which part of the chicken they liked best; how their favourite food of all was chips, the greasier the better... while they chatted and chewed and sucked and shrieked, they manufactured gas and passed it on to the bowser.

That was when the Act of Terror was perpetrated. No one knows for certain who was behind it, except perhaps the only surviving member of those heroic Women's Leaguers gathered, that fateful day, on Amai Pretty's stoep: Percy Ndanga D'ndichiri Fitzkudya-Smith. So huge was she that not even the explosion of the bowser could budge

her. The government line was Blair and his gay gangsters. The opposition claimed it was a ZANU-PF set-up. Harare's servile diplomatic community murmured vaguely about Bin Laden and Al Qaeda. But this is what Amai Percy said when I interviewed her at the only section of her Borrowdale mansion that could still accommodate her and her tubs of *Kentucky Fried Chicken* and chips with tomato sauce: the helicopter pad. 'Ah,' said she, 'but that day we were having too much farting.'

Five in One Blow

It wasn't the fact that Ravine Boyo-Davis was a downtrodden African American, or a woman, a lesbian at that, or a left-hander, which prompted her to kill, in historical order, an Italian, an Englishman, a Dane, and a Frenchman. It was her Welsh name, which connected her to the original inhabitants of the island now known as Great Britain. She was a true Briton; the rest (and deep down she included Jamaicans and Pakistanis) were colonials.

Ravine bridled at the thought that the word 'Welsh' actually meant 'foreigner' in the language of the Anglo-Saxons. They made me a foreigner in my own land, she bitterly mused (this notwithstanding the fact that she had been born in Memphis, Tennessee). My African brothers and sisters complain about being colonized... *hullo*... what about me? Not once, like the Africans, but four times!

First those bastards the Romans; forced us to speak Latin; polluted our dear land with towns, villas, theatres, public baths, central heating – roads, for pity's sake! Then, one morning, they pull out, leave us high and dry, easy pickings for those damned Anglo-Saxons who force us to use disgusting words like 'fuck', 'tit', and 'bum'! My ancestor, King Arthur, and his merry men, fought so bravely against those barbarians, but to no avail. Next thing there are smelly farms all over the place, and ships choking up the sea, and monasteries making booze out of honey, and literature. That *Beowulf* is un-bloody-readable! Next come the Danes, raid after raid - raping, rioting, and looting - and that idiot, Canute, who thought he could make the sea obey him. But worst of all for Ravine Boyo-Davis were the Normans. That William the Conqueror regarded her motherland as his own personal property. How dare he, with his Domesday Book and all! Bloody frog! Forcing us to speak French. All those stupid castles. And war! war! war!

She spent fruitless weeks searching downtown Memphis for an Italian, an Englishman, a Dane, and a Frenchman so that she could settle her score with the colonial oppressors. Then she heard that Africa was teeming with NGOs from all over Europe. She had once spent a year on Rotary Exchange in a dump of a place called

Bulawayo in Zim-something-or-other. She would re-connect with some of her Rotary ‘parents’, find a place to stay, and then settle some scores.

She was so obsessed with her mission that she failed to notice how the once gracious Bulawayo Airport had dwindled to a corrugated iron hangar, which used to house *Viscounts* and *Dakotas* (reliable aircraft provided the rubber bands, which drove the propellers, weren’t perished). She did notice, however, that Mr Wallop (call me Wally), her erstwhile ‘dad’, had, in twenty years, undergone a remarkable transformation: his bum had disappeared into his tummy, and his tummy made normal hugging impossible; so they simply shook hands. ‘How are you, otherwise...er...Ravine?’ were his first words to her.

She was fine and looking forward to her research. She had explained to ‘mom’ and ‘dad’ Wallop, by email, that she was working on her PhD thesis, the working title of which, ‘Race, Gender, and Left-Handedness in Homophobic Postcolonial Societies’, impressed them to a degree.

By the time they had passed through the third police road block, both feeling thoroughly grubby after being repeatedly body-searched for diamonds, emeralds, and gold nuggets, Ravine Boyo-Davis was in possession of information, which was likely to make her mission a ridiculously easy one, and all thanks to Wally, who was in one of his more confessional moods.

She’d asked him if he knew any NGOs (which he didn’t) but that got him talking about his own pedigree. ‘You know, Ravine, I’m a third generation Rho...er...Zimbo, but I can trace my line back to four different countries.’

‘Really...er...Dad?’

‘Call me Wally.’

‘Really, Wally?’

‘Yes. Let’s see, now... my maternal grandfather was Italian, a Paraffini... he married a Danish girl, name of Kierkegaard... my paternal grandfather was English... John Wallop, and he married into a French family, the La Normandies... very posh, they were....’

It was like winning the lottery, hearing each number coming out slowly, each one correct. Ravine’s heart began to pound. And there

was a bonus. Her Rotary ‘dad’ was a colonizer in his own right, a colonizer of her African brothers and sisters. Five with one blow. And she wouldn’t have to cut his throat. In his condition she could simply pop him.

She asked him to stop the car so that she could take a photograph of Bulawayo’s cooling towers. Instead of a camera, she removed from her back pack a switch blade cunningly fashioned to look like a harmless vibrator. Then she leaned over to the unsuspecting colonizer and released the blade into his tummy. Hot air smelling of stale *Castle Lager* escaped in a series of sighs which forced the avenger to look quizzically at the seeming vibrator in her hand. Wally Wallop said nothing but his face took on a confused look as it proceeded to crumple. She opened the driver’s door and pushed the withering balloon on to the road. Then she drove back to Joshua Mbaqanga Nkomo Airport, just in time to use her return ticket to North America via Johannesburg. Luckily for her there was one spare seat – in Business Class.

NGO Games

NGOs, like all of us, need time to unwind. They work under great pressure, and often in great danger, so utterly committed are they to the suffering masses of this earth. Once or twice a year it is the custom of those NGOs based in Sub-Saharan Africa to get together at some secluded venue, a safari lodge, say, and debrief(s) each other.

NGOs are a paradoxical lot. Among them you will find failed doctors, failed educators, failed lawyers, failed poets, failed priests, even. Yet as NGOs they are successes, precisely because they failed in their chosen careers. Jesus might have put it this way: ‘Those who fail will succeed’.

Success comes at a cost, however. These people are not too far from the front line when it comes to human rights issues. They avoid being beaten up or imprisoned if they can help it, but they compile reports, many many reports, on those unfortunate souls who do get beaten up and imprisoned. Report writing is what NGOs do best, and report writing is one of the main events at the NGO Games. Other events include variety of sexual partners (not for the sake of sex but for commitment to tolerance and universalism), off-road driving skills, eating mopane worms and/or mice (to show solidarity with the suffering masses), video-watching marathon (of videos endorsed by Oxfam and Amnesty International – the last person to fall asleep wins), and an egg-and-spoon race.

At this year’s games a number of countries was represented, countries which tended to have high unemployment rates at home, and which saw the NGO world as a respectable dumping ground for those sons and daughters of theirs who couldn’t face the stiff competition back home. Canada was there; Ireland was there; Germany was there; Denmark was there; Norway was there; Australia was there; South Africa was there; the Vatican City was there. Favourite for the ‘variety of sexual partners’ category, this year, was Norway. This is not a racial thing, you understand. The concept of race, at least in biological terms, does not exist. The term is redundant. Genetically we are all the same (and not that much different from tomatoes); environmentally, however – and here colonization is largely to blame – we can be very

different; hence the key word ‘variety’ in this category. The countries represented had all done each other, but Norway had gone much further afield: Norway had done Swazi, Dinka, Hutu, Sezuru, Gikuyu, Khoi-Khoi, Berber, Masai, Maori, Easter Islander, and even – only once, mind you – Walloon.

As it turned out, Norway was beaten, edged out by relative newcomer, Vatican City; though Norway (good humouredly of course) cried foul at the fruits and vegetables on Vatican City’s extensive list. The off-road race was won by South Africa, only because the vehicle of the favourite, Canada, had been painted maple leaf red. You see, a strict rule of this event is that all NGO vehicles (diesel fuelled *Toyota 4 x 4s*) must be painted white. Canada was disqualified. There was some consolation for Canada, however, which won the video-watching marathon, pushing the highly favoured Australia into second place. The first ten videos were on the plight of refugees all over the world; the second ten were on AIDS sufferers; the third ten were on North American prisons, the fourth on child soldiers, and the fifth... but nobody, not even Canada, got that far... was on female genital mutilation.

No one could match Germany in the report writing category. In the three days over which the course was run Germany produced no fewer than fourteen reports, all on the same topic, AIDS, and all pretty much repeat runs, but that is the nature of your NGO report. It’s the tautological approach, where you say the same thing over and over again, but you say it differently. A typical NGO report would be structured in this way: first you say it in simple words, then you say it in difficult words, then you say it in words unfathomable to the lay person, then you say it in pictures, then in maps, then in graphs, then in charts, then, and finally, in appendices.

The other countries cried foul (good humouredly of course) when Ireland won the eating contest because Ireland, it turned out, was Zimbabwe in the diaspora, and Zimbabwe rated among its delicacies, mice and mopane worms. And who won the egg and spoon race, the positive highlight of the games? Why, Denmark won it. So the only two countries not to take home a medal were Australia and Norway. But don’t worry, they had a good time; they still are if that fuggy

swaying 4 x 4, those Scandinavian shrieks and Antipodean groans are anything to go by.

West of East

There were two things in life for which Wank Dong had an overwhelming desire: money and sex, in that order. Since competition for those commodities was too strong for him in his homeland, he decided to light out for Africa where he would use sex to get money, and money to get sex. Ostensibly he would do what was expected of 'your inscrutable oriental': sell items which glittered and shone, but which soon broke; or do laundry. As he was allergic to washing powder he decided on the former; besides he'd heard that 'your negro' (he was slightly out of touch with contemporary world affairs), that 'your negro' could not resist trinkets, the shinier the better.

Like all capitalists, petty and grand, Wank Dong knew the value of a corrupt government. Africa abounded in corrupt governments, none more so than a country with the comical sounding name of Zimbabwe, a country which had the added advantage of being on very good terms with The Peoples' Republic of China. There was another, more sentimental reason for Wank's choice of Zimbabwe. He had once seen television footage of a wreath laying ceremony in that country's Heroes' Acre. The statues there of Zimbabwe's gallant sons and daughters looked uncannily oriental. Indeed one of them reminded him so much of his late Uncle Ding Dong – the family patriarch – that he shed a silent tear.

The Chinese presence in Harare had already become conspicuous so he decided to set up shop in Zimbabwe's second city, Bulawayo. What funny names in Africa! It was a propitious time for Chinese investors who, as official admirers of the esteemed leader, would not have their premises bulldozed (fuel permitting). It also meant that most of his local competitors who did not admire the esteemed leader, officially or unofficially, had been or were being (and will be) murambatzvinaed out of existence.

The shop of course was a front. What Wank Dong really set up was a brothel. In time he would have his cake and eat it; or, to put it another way, have his income generator and bang it. The front, however, was a front to be reckoned with: a veritable cascade of trinkets, baubles, knick-knacks, novelties, gewgaws, tinsel, trumpery,

and watches resembling famous Swiss makes, which were cheaper than a standard loaf of bread. And how it glittered, that shop front, in the bright Bulawayo light. How it sparkled and glimmered and flickered and shone. And what Wank had heard about ‘your negro’ was apparently true. They flocked to his shop to purchase a little colour in their drab lives, not as he believed, because they couldn’t resist shiny things, but because what little money they did have was insufficient for a banana or a medium-sized tomato.

None of this would have happened for Wank Dong had he not ‘purchased’ a corrupt official or two: one in the police force and one, a little higher if you please, in the government. He would supply them with girls and wads of cash, and, once he got more settled, heroin, opium, and morphine from a contact in the motherland with a contact in Australia with a contact in Afghanistan.

To date, Wank Dong’s ‘West of East’ policy has proved most successful. He has made so much money from his girls (tested by Wank himself for quality control), the pre-teens in particular, that he is considering going into legitimate partnership with the police inspector and the governor and acquiring ownership – they are prepared to go to war if necessary – of the Zambezi River.

Aunty Aunty

Doctor Doctor Lisbet Schwartzenshaeger could not believe her good luck. Just when she thought she'd exhausted everything nasty to write about settler Zimbabweans, she had discovered, in a dusty corner of the Bulawayo archives, in quite the wrong place, tucked away behind a load of *Flora Zambesiaca* junk, the meticulously kept records of one William Fitzpackage, DC Gwanda District. These records covered the years 1950 to 1962, and they contained enough material for yet another PhD. Her Canadian rival and fellow researcher, world famous authority on Southern Africa, co-author of the ground-breaking *ZIPRA: Sex and Death in the Zimbabwean Bush War*, Doctor Bugle Negrapompie, would be jealous. *Ausgezeichnet!* Lisbet would show that Yankee (sic) bitch. They competed for the approval of their mentor, Professor Emeritus Plautus Strange, who, in turn, competed for the approval of none other than Eric Hobsbawm, that great communist historian, untroubled by Stalin and, in more sentimental moments, happy to quote Brecht:

We, who wanted to prepare the ground for kindness
Could not be kind ourselves.

Lisbet's initial PhD thesis: *The Dog Motif in Racist Rhodesia* had been published by Oxford University Press, and had won her many accolades; her second: *White Kaffirs: Investigations into the Racist Sub-culture of Pre and Post Independent Zimbabwe* had been published by Cambridge University Press and had placed her among the world's historiographers to be reckoned with. Or, as she preferred to put it, 'with whom to be reckoned'. This new study would probably push even her gaseous mentor, Plautus Strange, aside.

We are in the year 2005. The last remnants of Zimbabwe's white community (apart from the handful of exceedingly rich wheeler dealers who have sold their souls to ZANU-PF) are well and truly down. Lisbet, however, is not prepared to stop kicking. The ones she kicks hardest are the really quite decent - even by Austrian and Canadian standards: teachers, nurses, social workers, receptionists,

housewives, househusbands, researchers, journalists, general practitioners, poets, and – the majority – old-age pensioners. It fills Lisbet with disgust and resentment to find that most white citizens of Zimbabwe are not enormously wealthy, enormously cruel, and enormously insensitive; most of them are not tobacco barons, mining magnates, big game hunters; most of them (to misquote the Bard) are, unaccommodated, no more than poor, bare, forked creatures. Of these *rassistin*, positively the worst are the ones who have been personally kind to Lisbet herself: those who have (r)assisted her with a place to stay, a bite to eat, a story to tell against themselves.

For a shag on a pile of trashy papers written by trashy Rhodesians like D. K. Shone, R. B. Drummond, J. C. Palgrave, E. V. Cook, D. G. Broadley, E. C. G. Pinhey, J. W. Sweeney, Oliver Ransford, Peter Ginn... she got glimpses of their scattered names while being pounded, from above, from below, from the side... thwap thwep thwip thwop thwup... a monologue was beyond her vagina but it could, since the archivist liked it dry, reproduce the five vowels... for a shag and a hundred dollars U.S. in small bills, she was allowed to take the DCs records away with her.

‘Away’ was the home of Kevon and Traycey Kitchen and three children, who insisted on calling Lisbet, much to her private alarm, Auntie Auntie (Are they mocking me?). Before the local governor and his team of youthful war veterans and middle-aged youths had driven Kevon off his farm, which he had purchased after Independence, he had been Bulawayo’s sole supplier of fresh garlic, jalapeno peppers, and globe artichokes. Under the auspices of the governor, the farm became, before dereliction set in – less than a year – a major supplier of firewood and bush meat. Now, since he was capable of doing domestic repairs and minor renovations, Kevon made a living as a handyman. In this he was ably supported by his handywoman wife, Traycey, and his handychildren children, ‘chuldrin’.

Lisbet first encountered Kevon while she was researching *White Kaffirs*. She wanted to interview him about land ownership and other sensitive Zimbabwean issues. He invited her around for dinner, poured out his heart (and all his booze) to the sympathetic – she called it *Einfühlung* - and very pretty Austrian lady, invited her to stay, and

stay she did. She was tired of stale smelling two-star hotels; besides, think of the money she could save! Using the Kitchen's home as a base, Lisbet travelled all over Zimbabwe in her *Toyota Land Cruiser*, enjoying the hospitality of unsuspecting white families who gave her their side of the story, and used the material, metamorphosed into the jargon of academia, to confirm what the world already knew about so-called rhodies: that they were lazy, stupid, good-for-nothing, dyed in the wool racists.

To cut a short story shorter, Doctor Doctor Lisbet Schwartzenshaeger processed the records of DC Fitzpackage into a dissertation, which earned her a third doctorate. It was entitled: *Scum Rises: White Hegemony in the South-Western District of Matabeleland during the Period 1950 to 1962*. When the Kitchen family heard of her success, the dissertation was to be published in book form by the University of Chicago Press, they were delighted for her sake, and the children wondered if they should now call her Aunty Aunty Aunty!

Let Us Now Praise

Nu sculon herigean, not famous
men, for God's sake, nor our fathers. Let's praise
those with nothing to say, and infinite
ways of saying it, like the singing head
of Orpheus, poet who overstays
the blooming rose, sings worlds into being,
sets sportsmen and chartered accountants free,
but only once he's lost Eurydice.

Nu sculon herigean, not Stalky
and Co, though their humble work continues.
Let's praise Philomela, the nightingale,
ravished, wordless singer (heard long ago
by Ruth, homesick, standing in tears among
strangers), but only once she's lost her tongue.

Nu sculon herigean – Anglo Saxon for let us now praise, used by the ancient poet Caedmon, who would have found it in Ecclesiasticus. Kipling also uses it in his poem *Stalky and Co*.

Male Poet

Heaney calls him the artful voyeur; I
like to think of him as a long-haired goat
circling then mounting, over and over
again, a tree stump; or a garden gnome
fingering the whorls of scented flowers;
or a dwarf leaving deposits of sea
sand on the bedsheets of sex tourists; or
Coleridge dreaming up Geraldine; or Keats
on the cold hillside. Girl with golden eyes.
Think of him, too, in Maurya's words: 'holding
a thing in the half of a red sail, and
water dripping out of it.' Sex and death.
Fourteen lines, ten syllables to the line.
Sparagmos. We're dying, Egypt, dying....

Sparagmos – Greek for ritual dismemberment
dying, Egypt, dying - Antony's words to Cleopatra in Shakespeare's play. Louis
MacNiece also uses these words in his poem, *The Sunlight on the Garden*.

While Reading Page 15 of Her Biography

I entered Frida Kahlo's door
by way of the 'o' in her name;
she'd blurred it but I found the frame
and ascended to the earth's core.

Always, always, she waits for me,
dancing with eyelids, hips and hands;
dance of moonlight on desert sands,
smiling enigmatically.

Her legs are long, a long black dress,
sashaying of oasis palms;
older than David's oldest psalms,
younger than yesterday's distress.

Exited Fri[e]da Kahlo's door –
diminishing unearthly moan;
not surprised at being alone
on the edge of a teeming shore.

Salome

(after Botticelli)

I use the same knife to amputate my
little toe, and to cut the olive twig
poised like a paint brush; then turn to the sigh
reeking of locust, wild honey, dried fig,
which escapes from your slackening mouth, dear
John. Notice how like a pencil I hold
the dudgeon. Look carefully at the smear
of our blood mingled with sap in a fold
of my lace-edged smock.

There's a wind blowing
against us; our water bottles are dry,
and there's some kind of conflict going
on in the background. Many souls will fly.
My slave, bearing your head on hers, looks vexed,
but I'm resigned: your cousin will be next.

Sing Me a Song

Canta mihi aliquid, boubou shrike;
something new, not that same old soulful tune
that brings into being the sun and moon,
which accompanied our marathon hike
to the Jessie Hotel in wintry June;
recalling a childhood that, all too soon,
played itself out – on a car tyre, a bike
attached by knickers to a red balloon.

Canta mihi aliquid, saddest bird,
but nothing that recalls a certain girl
with ankles of coral and eyes of pearl.
Sing me something new, something yet unheard
that brings into being ashes and dust;
stillness; something to sink my wanderlust.

Canta mihi aliquid – Latin for sing me something

Orthello

Dillard was taking his daily constitutional, a three kilometre round trip, which began at his front gate and ended at his back gate. It was a time for him to reflect on the unfairness of life and to prepare his work for the day. Looming large, at the moment, was his production of Shakespeare's *Othello*, the rehearsals for which had not been going too well. The performances were due in three days' time. His plan to cast a black Desdemona and a white Othello had been meeting with resistance. Logistically it made sense since only one white student (a male) had come for auditions; but it had created anomalies in the script, which still needed attending to.

It was Tuesday, which meant rubbish collection day for this part of Daleside. Dillard was shocked to see the number of scavengers around the bins, which were waiting to be emptied by the municipal garbage collectors; and the litter they scattered far and wide. The pied crows were worse than the humans who tended to be more selective in their choice of sweepings, rinsings and leavings. One old man with a ragged balaclava pulled over his face, in spite of the October weather, fished out a *SPAR* plastic bag, which had been tightly knotted. Dillard paused to watch him tear open the bag. Out fell a large dead rat. The old man picked it up by the tail and sniffed it before returning it to the metal dustbin. A small queue had formed behind the old man, mainly of primary school children in their ill-fitting hand-me-downs. A Lucky Dip queue!

Even at this time of the morning the heat was oppressive, though the jacaranda blossoms did not seem to mind; and Dillard could not recall a time when the bougainvillea vines had looked so splendid; such a variety of brilliant colour; such vicious thorns, mind you! Already the sprinklers were going. He could hear them behind the two metre instarect walls topped with razor or electric wire. It was the garbage bins from these houses that were attracting crows, stray dogs and Bulawayo's rapidly growing tribe of human offscourings.

Ahead of him to the left, a sleek electronically controlled gate opened for an equally sleek *Mercedes Benz* driven by a not so sleek representative of Bulawayo's *nouveau riche*. Dillard recognized

Desdemona's father and gave him a coy greeting, which was returned with bluster. A stanza from one of this year's A-level poems swam into his consciousness:

'The city filled with orange trees
is lost', which, interpreted, meant
all conspicuous luxuries
augur ruinous punishment.

Not that many orange trees left in Bulawayo. Not that many *mukiwas* either. Plenty of jacarandas, though; and silver oaks, and flamboyants, and eucalyptus. Botanical colonization was proving more resilient than its human equivalent. Dillard was one of only three white teachers left at his school, all middle-aged or elderly. The best black and brown teachers had also left for greener pastures – not that you're going to find too much green pasture in Francistown or Polokwane or Darwin.

Five years ago there hadn't been a single vendor on his route; now he counted thirty: ten for each kilometre. All the vendors were either women or children. They created little tables out of cardboard boxes or bits of paving. On these surfaces they displayed, ever so neatly, their meagre stock: overripe tomatoes and bananas, cigarettes (sold individually), boiled sweets, and the ubiquitous 'penny cools'. As a consequence of these vendors and their miniature tuck-shops, Dillard's route had become fouled with tons of litter, dominated by the transparent plastic 'penny cool' containers.

At first Dillard thought that the vendors worked for themselves until he began to notice a *Pajero* with tinted windows, which visited each site periodically. He made a few discreet enquiries and was not that surprised to learn that a single entrepreneur, very well connected in ruling party circles, owned all these tuckshops, and many more besides. Dillard learnt, furthermore, that there was a tuckshop war going on in the suburbs of Bulawayo. The tinted *Pajero* had held a monopoly until the *BMW* with blackened windows sidled into view.

Nowadays Dillard had to make several detours from his regular route since there were so many leaks from the municipal water system. Spreckley Road resembled a Venetian canal, while it would soon be possible to go white water rafting down William Shakespeare Avenue. As recently as a few months back, the municipality would have responded promptly to a reported leak; now they didn't even answer the phone. It had not taken the ruling party long to bankrupt Bulawayo, an MDC stronghold. The City of Kings was dying.

One of his detours took Dillard past the palatial residence of Othello's family. He heard the sprinklers going, and from the house a famous Country and Western singer whose name Dillard couldn't remember, but whose tits and mop of bottle blonde hair he could clearly visualise, was belting out a song with the refrain: 'Nine to five'. Their rubbish bin was being besieged by no fewer than five scrawny school children. Behind the electric gate a Boerbul and a Rottweiler, in a frenzy to get at the children, were attacking each other. A beautifully lettered sign on the wall near the gate read: IF YOU ENTER THESE PREMISES WITHOUT PERMISSION YOU WILL BE EATEN ALIVE.

The Othello family were also part of Bulawayo's ostentatious *nouveau riche*. Upstarts, Dillard liked to call them. Dillard came from pioneer stock. His great grandfather had been an Anglican missionary in the Inyati area. His grandmother had been born in old Mangwe Fort during the 1896 Matabele rebellion. He could go on! Othello's father had made his fortune in the early years of Independence, in what is euphemistically termed 'buying and selling'. All you needed was one corrupt senior civil servant, preferably attached to Customs and Immigration. Desdemona's father had to wait a little longer, when unbudgeted payouts to war veterans, forays into the DRC, and the agricultural reform programme (also known as the Third Chimurenga) created a black market economy where black, white, and brown marketeers became shockingly rich in a shockingly short period of time, while the rest of the country grew abject. Desdemona's father 'bought' food donated by various NGOs, repackaged it, and sold it to the rural poor. He also dabbled in diesel, paraffin, and cooking oil.

What to do about the play! How could you have a white Othello when the text called for a Moor, 'thick-lips', an 'old black ram'? How could you have a black Desdemona when the text called for a Venetian, 'that whiter skin of hers than snow', a 'white ewe'? Simple: change the text; update it; localise it. That's what you do to Shakespeare. How about 'thin-lips'? How about 'an old white ram is tugging your black ewe'? How about 'that blacker skin of hers than coal'? No, not 'coal': that's racist. 'Ebony'? Yes, that's better. Hang on! Ebony's a heavy, dark wood used for making furniture. Does it really have positive connotations? 'That blacker skin of hers, than ebony'. Not so sure. Besides it's not iambic. Got to be a single syllable. 'Jet'? Possibly, but it's still a type of coal! 'Sable'? Sad and un-iambic.

Not so simple after all.

Then Dillard had a flash of inspiration. Change Moor to Zimbabwean, Venetian to Rhodesian (goodness, it almost rhymed!) - the rest would fall into place. Hang on a moment! Then the only white actor in the play would be Zimbabwean, and all the other actors, all black or brown, would be Rhodesians! Try it the other way round: change Moor to Rhodesian, Venetian to Zimbabwean. Let's test it: what does Brabantio say?

Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see:
She has deceived her father and may thee.

Okay:

Look to her, Rhodesian...

No, that buggers up the metre. What about:

Look, Rhodesian, if thou hast eyes to see:
She has deceived her father and may thee.

Not bad, but what about when Shakespeare speaks metaphorically? When the Duke tries to console Desdemona's father, doesn't he say something like, 'And noble signior'... something like:

If virtue no delighted beauty lack,
Your son-in-law is far more fair than black.

Now the problem isn't metre, it's rhyme. If I change it to 'far more black than fair', I'm going to have to find a word to rhyme with 'fair'. Let's see...er...what about:

If virtue's qualities are always rare
Your son-in-law is far more black than fair.

Bit clumsy. What if I change 'fair' to 'white'? Um...what about:

If virtue lack no beauties that delight
Your son-in-law is far more black than white.

Better: 'white' has fewer positive connotations than 'fair'. Needs more work, though. Certainly needs more work.

Dillard was looking forward to a pot of tea and a couple of slices of toast when he unlatched his back gate. And he must phone the printers to see if the *Othello* programme was ready. But there was a power failure, and the phone lines were down. Then he noticed that he had been burgled. Gone was his digital radio (never to be replaced); gone was his *Toshiba* laptop (never to be replaced); gone was his unopened bottle of *Green Valley* wine (likely to be replaced).

Worse was yet to come. When he arrived at school – late again, Mr Dillard! - the office informed him that his programmes had been delivered by the printers. He tore open the package, thumbed out a programme, only to find that they had misspelt the title, and that he was going to produce a play called *Orthello*.

Rite of Passage

In the end it wasn't a woman too young or a back too sore, which nudged me over the threshold from middle age to old age. It was South African officialdom.

My best friend, Fred, who lives in New Zealand, provided me with enough foreign currency to buy a new starter motor for my 1978 *Ford Escort*, and a new pair of shoes (*Grasshoppers*) for my 1947 feet. I booked the car into a reputable garage in Louis Trichardt, and myself into a delightful guest house in the mountains, which gives special rates to beleaguered Zimbabweans. All went well. The car got its starter motor and I got my shoes. It was on my return, a Saturday, when things began to go wrong.

I left the guest house around seven in the morning. I didn't have to push start the car, and my feet felt snug in their brand new tan-coloured shoes. What's more I still had five hundred Rand in my pocket, five blue notes, enough to pay for my son's school books back in Bulawayo.

At the bottom of the last mountainous descent I encountered my first blockade. A smartly dressed policeman (or was he a soldier?) waved me down and swaggered over to my window. His eyes positively lit up when he saw that I had forgotten to secure my seat belt. He ordered me to park off the road and to surrender my driver's licence, a faded copy of a copy of the original, which had been stolen some years back.

He held my licence, poised, as if he were about to make a move in a game of cards. He had trumps. 'I caught you, didn't I, old man?'

'Sorry, I -'

'We don't accept 'sorry' in this country. Too late!' I was making a gesture to fasten my seat belt. 'I caught you.'

'I forgot.'

'In this country you don't forget these things. Old man, you have committed a serious offence. I am going to have to arrest you, or you will pay a spot fine of four hundred Rand?'

I dragged the five blue notes from my pocket saying 'This is all I have', but when I held them up to him he became agitated and looked

about him: at the vendors and their watermelons, at the other law enforcers and their assault weapons, at the late model cars with South African number plates being cheerfully waved through the blockade.

‘Keep them down!’ he growled, and he pushed my hand of five buffalo knaves onto my lap. Then he made me test my hooter, my lights, and my hand brake. He walked round the car a few times, all the while tapping my licence thoughtfully against his cheek. At last he returned to the driver’s window and stared at me in silence for about a minute. I had begun to tremble. He reminded me of a character from one of Wole Soyinka’s satires. Then he said: ‘You know, old man, I pity you, I really pity you. I am thinking how can I help you in some way.’

‘I’ll pay the fine,’ I said lamely.

‘But that is all what you have got, and you are an old man with an old vehicle. From where are you?’

‘Bulawayo.’

‘And you do what?’

‘I’m a school teacher.’

‘Ah, that is a good job. You are helping the little children?’

‘I try.’

‘Now, I have this problem. I pity you. Tell me, what must I do?’

‘I have enough to pay the fine.’ I selected four notes and held them up to him, but he pushed my hand onto my lap.

‘Just give me something for drink.’

‘Like this,’ I said, holding up one note, but not too high.

He executed the disappearing card trick, returned my licence, and said, ‘Now go!’

The next blockade was in the middle of some chaotic road works between Musina and Beitbridge. There were yellow and red signs all over the place warning motorists to slow down, to detour here, detour there; and earthworks, bulldozers, everywhere. Consequently, no longer having the reflexes of middle-age, let alone youth, I crossed the blockade line before my brakes brought me to a screaming halt. Luckily I had been travelling at well below the recommended speed.

The biggest, most scary-looking of the law enforcers shouted, ‘That one is mine!’ and came running at me from behind a yellow

excavator. My heart sank into my bowels. He was a little breathless when he began shouting at me: 'You, old man, have committed a serious crime. Reckless driving. Endangering other motorists, pedestrians... you are in big, big trouble. Surrender your licence!'

I apologized and surrendered my licence.

'Sorry! What is sorry? In this country we do not accept 'sorry'. Drive off the road and wait there.'

I could barely re-start the car, my fingers were trembling so. But once I'd managed to turn the key, my new starter motor did not let me down. Then I waited, my head slumped on the steering wheel, waves of nausea building up momentum in my stomach. The sun's heat, even that early in the morning, was stifling.

'You! Old man! My superior wants to see you.'

His superior was sitting in a police van a few metres away. Both doors were wide open because of the heat. He climbed into the passenger seat next to his superior, and waited for my weary, albeit Grasshoppered, feet to find their abject way. As I walked I dug my hand into my trousers' pocket and caressed the remaining four one hundred Rand notes. I knew not to take them out for the world to see, but once screened by the open door of the van, I displayed them. 'This is all I have left,' I said.

The superior had a can of coke between his thighs. Without looking at me he said, 'You have committed a very serious crime. You could go to jail for this.'

I said I was sorry.

'What are we going to do with you, old man?' I wasn't sure which of them had said this. I was fighting dizziness, nausea, even tears.

I said I didn't know.

The policeman (or was he a soldier) who had bagged me, then quickly took the four notes from my hand, returned my licence and, after the slightest hesitation, one of the notes, and said, 'Go!'

My rite of passage from middle-age to old-age wasn't yet over. There was still the border post to come. My father used to say that when hell closes down for repairs, the devil goes to Beitbridge for a holiday. And this Saturday, now approaching midday, the devil would not have been disappointed by the baking mayhem on either side of

the Limpopo River. I was so stunned by my experiences at the police blockades that I got just about everything wrong, including the unprecedented act of, somehow, returning to South Africa! Don't ask me how I did it. I couldn't tell you. At least, this time, I was laughed at by South African officialdom, and not threatened.

I eased my *Ford Escort* into a queue, which I believed was going through the first Zimbabwean checkpoint. I noticed they were searching only Zimbabwean cars. When it came to my turn they asked if they could look inside the boot. I felt quite confident because the few groceries I had bought were way below my allocation. In my boot, like most Zimbabweans, I keep a twenty litre petrol container, which still contained the ten or so litres of petrol I had managed to purchase in Bulawayo, from a friend of a friend. The official tested the weight of the container and asked me if I had declared the petrol. I hadn't. It had never occurred to me. The official then seized my gate pass and ordered me to return to Customs and declare the petrol. There was a queue behind me so I had to drive over a low ramp in order to return to Customs. Eventually the process was completed and I made my way back to the checkpoint queue. By now my old car was beginning to overheat, an objective correlative to my sizzling brain. They searched me yet again. One official was most amused by my two litre box of *Tassenburg* dry red wine and he lifted it out of the car for all his colleagues to laugh at. I guess it was funny: a Zimbabwean bringing a box of cheap South African wine in to South Africa. But I thought I was heading for home, and I was mortified.

My gate pass was returned to me and I proceeded to what I thought was the final barrier. The attendant took one look at the pass and broke into a smile. 'But this pass is for Zimbabwe,' he said.

'I know,' I replied, 'I'm going home.'

'Is South Africa your home?'

'No. I'm Zimbabwean.'

'But you are heading for South Africa. Zimbabwe is in the other direction. There!' He pointed the other way.

He was the kindest official of all: a young man in an open-necked white shirt, which hung out of his trousers. He showed me where to

turn around, more ramps, and pointed out the road, which would take me across the Limpopo. He called me *Madala*.

So it wasn't a woman too young or a back too sore, which made me finally accept that I am an old man. My *Grasshoppers* and my starter motor are likely to outlast me; the *Tassenburg* has long gone.

Sewerage Pipe

Shorn Coleridge had decided to commit suicide, or sewerage pipe, as he jokingly called it. He was going to do something predictable like hanging or poison. A bullet in the mouth, pointing brainwards, required too much red tape, too much economic outlay. Jesus, guns were expensive. He went to the local hardware store and bought three metres of sash cord, and a box of Ratkill. He took these items home and put them next to each other on the dining room table. How to decide. He thought of going 'eeny meeny miny mo...' but that meant he would have to use that racist word; so he searched the house for a coin to toss. Easier said than done. Coins had been out of circulation for months in Zimbabwe. Only the brown, \$20 000 Bearer Cheques were of any value: about six potatoes of value. He found no coin, but during the search an idea came to him. Why not die usefully?

The government, which had been in power since independence in 1980, looked as if it was going to remain in power for ever – unless the suffering masses took to the streets in their tens of thousands, in their hundreds of thousands (leave millions, billions, and trillions to the fiscus) and protested. Protested against vote rigging, politicisation of the police and the armed forces, the judiciary, the church, chiefs, domestic pets even. Shorn still bore the scars on his left index finger of the chomp of an African Grey; and his friend Shawn de Quincey still limped from the time a Rhodesian Ridgeback had buried its fangs in the region of his sciatic nerve.

Yes, why not die usefully? Why not initiate a mass protest right here in Bulawayo. The town was already teeming with the unemployed, and with school children whose parents could no longer afford the fees. He needed a banner and a loud hailer. He would set himself up at the City Hall, under the clock; and then, once enough of a crowd had gathered, he would lead them along Sel... er... Leopold Takawira Avenue towards the Law Courts. There would be bloodshed, and Shorn would be a prime target, but by the time he fell, still clutching his banner, the protesters would be so numerous that the police would take to their heels. News of the uprising would quickly spread to Harare, thence to Masvingo, Mutare, Gweru, Kwe Kwe,

maybe even Colleen Bawn. The masses would rise up, and the government would fall.

He made a banner out of a single-bed white sheet and two broom handles. Using thick, felt tipped pens, blue, red, and green, he wrote: DOWN WITH ZANU-PF POOFTAS. He used drawing pins to connect the sheet to the broom handles, rolled it carefully as if it were some sacred scroll, and carried it over his shoulder to town. (He couldn't get hold of a loud hailer).

He chose a week day when the streets and pavements of Bulawayo were at their most crowded. He recognized the uniforms of at least twelve schools, primary as well as secondary. The unemployed, surprisingly well dressed thanks to unscrupulous credit facilities at clothing stores, which plunged them into irrecoverable debt, wandered aimlessly about or hovered near news stands in the hope of getting a free read of the *Chronicle*, or last week's *Independent*, or the previous week's *Standard*, or the week prior to that's Johannesburg *Sunday Times*. Beggars there were, and street kids aplenty: rivals, for junk food scraps, of pied crows, sparrows, pigeons, and *rattus rattus alexandrinus*.

The banner unfurled was too wide to hold in his hands so he persuaded a couple of street children to hold it for him. Then he began to hurl philippics. People gathered, pointed, smiled, laughed, clicked their tongues. The street children soon grew tired of their task and allowed the banner to tilt. One of them squatted, which created a hypotenuse effect. Not much of the banner remained legible.

Enough, however, for a pack of teenage militias, recent graduates from one of the Border Gezi training camps, who had been taught that any kith and kin of Blair and his gay gangsters, was Zimbabwe's enemy number one. There were three girls and six boys, identically dressed in green combat outfits, black boots, black belts, and black batons.

As they converged on Shorn, the small crowd he had attracted quickly dispersed to a safe distance from where they could watch the action. The street kids dropped the banner and took to their heels. Down came the batons, in went the boots; and as consciousness began to fade from Shorn's mind he regretted only that his death wouldn't achieve

anything useful. He was vaguely aware of screaming, as one of the broom handles rammed into his bottom, or 'sewerage pipe', as the militias jokingly called it.

The Keys

Mr and Mrs Box, an elderly couple who depended on the Western Union to see them through their twilight – ‘when the lights are low’ – year(s), were taking a walk, she hobbling, he tottering, round the block when they came upon a commotion at Number 43, one of the few properties in the neighbourhood that had not succumbed to durawalls. Two women were having a game of tug o’war with a rolled up Persian carpet; another two were wrestling, in the Ancient Greek style (though not naked), over a television set; yet another two were screaming at each other for pulling a plastic shower curtain in half. From a pair of very good quality *Sanyo* speakers blared a type of township music known as *mbaqanga*. An elderly man dressed in typical colonial cookboy’s uniform: soft head-covering, khaki shirt and shorts, white apron, bare feet, seemed to be holding court. He sat at a formica table of the type commonly used in Zimbabwean kitchens for the rituals of egg, bacon, sausage, fried tomato, toast, marmalade, and tea – known the world over as an English breakfast. At his elbow stood a bottle of altar wine and a bottle of *Dimple Haig* Scotch whisky. The Box couple at the gate watched in amazement as the Master of Ceremonies at this yard sale-cum-*pungwe* poured a healthy tot of *Dimple Haig* into an empty jam tin, filled it with altar wine, and then proceeded to sip it like tea. The illusion of tea was enhanced when he reached over for a matzo wafer, dunked and chewed, sipped, dunked and chewed, sipped... and he went on dunking and chewing and sipping until – Mrs Box counted seven, Mr Box counted eight; they argued about it later – all the wafers were finished. People were coming and going, not through the gate where the Boxes stooped, but through a hole in the fence. A merry fire was blazing on the lawn, fuelled with what looked like Oregon pine ceiling boards, and around which was gathered a number of men roasting roasts – topside, silverside, fillet, leg of lamb, saddle of lamb – Mrs Box also thought she saw a sirloin, while Mr Box noticed that there was none of his favourite: crackling pork.

The Boxes had been doing this walk ever since Vincent’s retirement. He had been senior partner at a well known firm of

attorney's Cohen, Cohen, and St Cohen. They had lived very comfortably off his generous pension, until the Zimbabwean currency had collapsed. Luckily for them – ‘and the flick’ring shadows’ - their children, Boxy who lived in Australia, and Biggy who lived in Canada, sent them money every month via the Western Union, which had long surpassed Anglo American and Bulawayo's Vapostori as Zimbabwe's major foreign currency earner. Their walk took in a block of sixteen properties, all of which, when the Boxes began the routine, had been occupied by white families. Twelve years later, four of the properties had been turned into guest houses, aka brothels, by absentee emergent businessmen with strong ZANU-PF connections; five of them were now occupied by anything up to ten black families (the poorest living in wooden garden sheds and converted swimming pools); two of them had become used, very used, and unbelievably used car ‘showrooms’ catering to the informal sector; four of them belonged to the nephew of a highly connected aunt, which his friends house-sat for him until his triumphant return (to be announced) from London; and one of them, Number 43, still belonged to the Newman family who had owned it and lived in it since 1895.

The only remaining member of the Newman family, old Ruth: mother of four, grandmother of seven, and great grandmother of twelve, all, all in other countries across the globe: was confined to a wheelchair. As they continued on their walk, the Boxes worried about Mrs Newman, alone in that house, old and infirm. They decided to telephone her once they got home, and ask if they could help in any way. Her number was in the directory, the only Newman left in Bulawayo. Mr Box dialled; he was answered almost immediately: ‘Jerry, is that you?’

‘Er, no, it's ...’

‘Stanley? Why don't you call any more?’

‘No, Mrs Newman, I'm a neighbour... name of Box. I just thought...’

‘What? You just thought what?’

‘Er... will you phone if you need help? Number's 042672... I...we -’

‘Please get off the line? Off! Get off! I vunt for to shpeak mit my son, the doctor!’ Ruth’s Yiddish accent was never far below the surface. Her husband, Paul Newman, had met and married her in Vienna, in 1934, and brought her back to the family home in Bulawayo, where the family had flourished until the late nineteen sixties when they began to feel threatened by the *Schwartzen* and, one by one, left. Only Ruth and her husband, Paul, stayed on, Ruth in Number 43 and Paul in the Jewish cemetery at Athlone. The remainder and the remains.

The phone came crashing down in Vincent’s left ear, and he gave his wife a shoulder shrug. Then, almost immediately, the phone rang: ‘Yes, hello, 042672?’

‘Er... speaking.’

‘Mister... I am afraid... please... I am very afraid. Please come help. He -’ the phone came crashing down.

‘She’s in trouble,’ said Vincent to his wife Melody, ‘let’s go.’

They didn’t ‘go’, not even ‘softly’; they tottered and hobbled to the gate of number 43, where their requests to be let in were ignored by the Master of Ceremonies. He was still at the formica table sipping from his jam tin and digging bits of matzo from his teeth with a match stick. He reeked of a combination of *4711 Eau de Cologne* and *Yardleys English Lavender*, which mingled with the smell of roasting meat; and on the first digit of the little finger of his left hand – stuck there – was a diamond almost as big as the Ritz.

So they went, along with everyone else, through the hole in the fence. ‘We’ve come to visit the madam,’ said Melody to no one in particular, and no one in particular listened to her. But he watched them: all the way up the red cement steps, on to the red cement verandah, through the open front door, along the Rhodesian teak floor boards of the passage way: he watched them.

‘Mrs Newman!’ called Melody anxiously.

And then Vincent – ‘though the heart be weary’ – ‘Mrs Newman?’

They wandered about this musty shell of a house, it was almost empty of furnishings, calling for the old lady. ‘Here. I’m here,’ they finally heard, and they traced her voice to a closed in porch.

‘Knock knock! Mrs Newman?’

‘Come in, please?’

She was in her wheelchair, surrounded by medicines in bottles, jars and boxes. She had the frightened eyes of a hunted animal, and she stank of incontinence and neglect. Both Boxes had to work hard to suppress their vomit reflexes.

She had a large bunch of keys hanging from her neck. The bunch was adorned with a faded blue silk ribbon. She was about to speak when a presence, laid up in lavender, materialised at the porch entrance. The look of appeal on Ruth Newman’s face changed to a look of terror. One hand clutched the keys on her bosom, while the other raised itself in a feeble attitude of defence. Then, from the back of her throat, came these words, each one half strangled: ‘I vunt you should pleez go. *Weg, weg... bitte weggehen.*’

The old couple went, watched all the way to the hole in the fence, and laboured – ‘sad the day and long’ – back to their own home where they comforted themselves with a pot of tea and a plate of ginger snaps.

A week or so later, the Boxes were stocking up with groceries at the local supermarket when they came across Mrs Newman’s ‘cookboy’. He was pushing a trolley laden with imported luxuries, prominent among them being bottles of Scotch whisky. Melody counted five; Vincent counted six (later they would argue about it); but what most drew their attention was the bunch of keys, adorned with a faded blue ribbon, which dangled from his wiry old neck.

Quite Epiphanic, Really

Licking walls and chewing coal were not the only cravings glorious Gloria developed when she became pregnant for the first time. She discovered the art of bonsai, which appealed to her *elan vital*. In the ornamental miniature tree she perceived not the flesh and bones, not the word, but the... well... a kind of pervasive transforming influence, like leaven. How did whatsisname put it:

Full fathom five thy father lies;
Of his bones are coral made:
Those are pearls that were his eyes:
Nothing of him that doth fade,
But doth suffer a sea-change
Into something rich and strange.

Yes. A merging of nature and art. Not bones and eyes; not poetry; but coral and pearls – *bon* and *sai*. Quite epiphanic, really.

Glorious Gloria's husband, Anthinny, was one of those chartered accountants who did not fantasize about being a lion tamer; consequently he, his suburban utility vehicle, and his complete set of *Gary Player* golf clubs were a calming influence on the mother-to-be. He looked upon her eccentric behaviour with amused tolerance, and lavished her and the embryo with gifts inclining to the colour blue. While at school Anthinny had played first team rugby, and he was determined to repeat that transcendent experience, vicariously, through his son, er... they hadn't yet thought of a name. Something Biblical, perhaps, like Mawk, or Methew. But what if it's a girl? Darn it, life's complicated!

Gloria started looking round for specimens, and hit the jackpot at a nursery on the Old Esigodini Road, which had gone bankrupt and was selling its stock at giveaway prices. Among that stock were a number of indigenous trees, which had been unsold for years; consequently they had become root-bound in their black plastic containers, and already looked a bit like bonsais. She chose a baobab, a pod mahogany and, unfortunately it seems, a rain tree. Then she went

looking for containers: a deep flared oval for the pod mahogany, a rectangle with lip (soft corners) for the baobab, and a round cascade for the fateful rain tree. She bought some potting soil, some horticultural grit, and some composted bark. She already had the basic tools: a small pair of scissors for cutting shoots, a pair of tweezers for picking off bugs, secateurs for pruning and cutting roots, and a chopstick (nice touch) for combing out roots.

As the baobab was already teetering to one side, she decided (nibbling a piece of coal) to shape it in the *Windswept* or *Fukinagashi* style. The *Literati* or *Bunjin* style would suit the erect pod mahogany, while the rain tree, already seriously stressed, would be made more visually exciting with a bit of deadwood, a *jin*, to the better informed.

First things first. The specimens had to be transferred from their battered black plastic sleeves to the new stoneware containers. This required some quite ruthless snipping and combing of roots (quick lick of the dining room wall). Gloria asked her domestic worker, Eatmore, to help her, and that was when the trouble began. Eatmore took one look at the savaged rain tree and ran screaming out of the house.

A sugared bun never failed on occasions like these, and, once Eatmore was back in the house, Gloria asked her why the panic. Eatmore came from a tribe that regarded the rain tree with great suspicion. She called it *ichithamuzi*. Water dripped from its leaves before the onset of the seasonal rains. Families who used its wood to make fire were destroyed. She urged Gloria to return it to the nursery, but Gloria dismissed Eatmore's fear with amused contempt (these people!), and gave her another sugared bun.

Gloria then got to work. She (well, Eatmore) washed the pots and covered the drainage holes with plastic mesh. She showed Eatmore how to insert the anchorage wire through one hole and back up another, and then how to spread the soil mixture across the base of the pot. Gloria did not trust Eatmore with secateurs so she herself had to cut back the sapling's fibrous roots, shorten heavy roots, and create a compact root system at the trunk base. It made her feel quite sexy, somehow.

When it came to planting, Eatmore refused to handle the rain tree. Gloria called her a stupid *into* [thing] and sent her off to scrub floors.

Single-handed now, glorious Gloria positioned each tree on the soil to give the correct front view. Then she brought the anchorage wires across each rootball [am I boring you?], and twisted them together. Once she felt that the trees were secure, she added more soil and gently worked it into the root masses until the containers were full. Then she watered them well. Later she would decorate the surfaces with moist moss.

In order to create more attractive silhouettes, she adjusted the trunks and some of the branches of the trees with pliable copper wire. But she wasn't yet finished with the rain tree - what did Eatmore call it? eekeetamooshi, or something. Honestly, these people! A *jin* gives the impression of age. It makes the tree look as if it has been naturally damaged. Now, unnaturally, Gloria damaged the rain tree. She tore off a good third of its bark, leaving the white wood underneath exposed. Proudly she displayed her three bonsais on a table in a sunny corner of the lounge, and received many sighs and gasps of admiration from her friends, all pretty and all married to chartered accountants who had no intentions of switching to lion taming.

The pod mahogany flourished, the baobab flourished, but the rain tree, never healthy in captivity, sickened and died. Eatmore refused to touch it so Gloria, now heavily pregnant, had to do it. Sadly she removed *lonchocarpus capassa* from the round cascade pot and threw it into the fire place. By now she'd lost interest in the art of bonsai so the rain tree's replacement was a pink geranium. Ah, cute, man!

Anthinny was present at the birth. It was a terrible labour. Hours and hours. The baby's head was huge. He watched it crowning. Before he could be absolutely sure he cried out: 'It's a...er...' and then he fell silent. The paediatrician took over: 'It's a... er...person of restricted growth; quite epiphanic, really.'

Hair

Hair is alive and dead.
It has a good smell,
like wax crayons.

Hair is a paradox:
it's dead and alive;
poets love hair.

Hair can be dissolute.
Woman of my dreams,
let down your hair.

Rapunzel, Rapunzel,
please let down your hair
that I may climb

into your cosy bed,
that I may linger
in paradise.

Woman of the attic,
your hair is on fire;
Bertha grunting.

Come down to me, grunting
Bertha, that I may
sojourn in hell.

Hair is a conversion
of subject-object;
a paradox

beloved of poets;
hair is redolent
of wax crayons.

These Stanzas Few

Yes, there are doves
mournful in their cries
as clouds building, breaking,
there are doves in your eyes.

And yes, there's a cello
engorged with silken sin,
tempting my fingertips,
a cello in your skin.

O, and then there are trees,
potato, baked, among
nyala berry, boer bean,
trees on your mouth, your tongue.

And something in the sky,
twilight, medium rare,
dawn a bloody fillet
in the flip of your hair.

And do I have the will
though I sing these stanzas few,
the will to fall in love
again, with you, *nur du?*

Grey Louries

They look hand-made,
each one slightly different;
misshapen as free verse;
collector's items, perhaps.
They fly like paper aeroplanes.
Their raucous call is how
I imagine pterodactyls
may have sounded
millions of years ago.

Go away yourself!
Shoo! Stop
gorging on the candid
blossoms of my apricot tree.
Go-away!
Go-way!
Gway!

Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but a longing fulfilled is a tree of life.

Proverbs 13.12

John Eppel was born in Lydenburg, South Africa, but moved to Colleen Bawn in Zimbabwe at the age of four. He now lives in Bulawayo, where he teaches English. He was awarded the Ingrid Jonker Prize for his first poetry book, *Spoils of War*, and the M-Net Prize for his first novel, *D G G Berry's The Great North Road*.

Spoils of War, *Carrefour* (1989)
D G G Berry's The Great North Road,
Carrefour/Hippogriff (1989)
Hatchings, *Carrefour* (1993)
The Giraffe Man, *Quellerie* (1994)
Sonata for Matabeleland, *Snailpress/Baobab Books* (1995)
Selected Poems 1965-1995, *Childline* (2001)
The Curse of the Ripe Tomato, *'amaBooks* (2001)
The Holy Innocents, *'amaBooks* (2002)
The Caruso of Colleen Bawn and Other Short Writings,
'amaBooks (2004)
Songs My Country Taught Me, *Weaver Press* (2005)
Hatchings, *'amaBooks* (2006)

A painting of a white man wearing a wide-brimmed hat, crawling through dense green foliage. He is looking down at a small pink flower. The scene is set in a lush, overgrown garden with various plants and flowers.

White Man Crawling is a collection of short stories and poems by the award winning Bulawayo writer John Eppel. His stories are uncomfortably funny; his poems uncomfortably sad. His stories speak first to all of us, then to his own quirky nature; his poems speak first to himself and to those few who know him nearly, and then to all of us.

For more than forty years John Eppel has been a unique double-voice in the annals of Zimbabwean literature: the satirist and the lyricist.

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